

finding it was the easy part ...



GOLD

a summer story

a novel by Mike Bozart

[[[...]]] ... *from the inside flap* ...

Mark and Susan's marriage is on the rocks. Their east Charlotte home is entering foreclosure. The kitchen walls are being wallpapered with unpaid bills.

When Mark unexpectedly finds some record-setting gold nuggets, an erotically charged, suspense-laced, thought-filled gambit begins, twisting through the Carolina Beach tourist season.

Success slips through Mark's hands like grains of sand. Gold fever takes its toll in the sultry, scorching, Atlantic Coast heat. Who – or what – was chasing him? ... and why?

Susan, a Cherokee Native American, has had it; she can't continue in this sordid sexual saga, bereft of true love.

Subsequent chances for discovery are blown until David arrives from Raleigh to pick up a part at a salvage yard in Wilmington. A second odyssey soon begins in which no one can be trusted. Suspicion reigns. The scheming and deception soon reach a fatal nadir.

A young Haitian lady, an aspiring novelist, takes notes and gives up her heart, mind and body along the sensual way. An easy future awaits. All is going swimmingly; the surf is calm. Then a tragic rogue wave strikes yet again. Why?

The Filipina TV reporter knows more. Will she go to the cops? Will she cut a deal? Will she turn a blind eye? Will she look for the primal source? Will she throw the hungry dog a bodacious bone? But most importantly, will she survive the golden curse in this erotic steam-pot of madness?

GOLD

a summer story

a novel by Mike Bozart

Edition: 9th inning (July 2018)

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And now for some somber legalese ...

First and foremost, this is a work of fiction. *GOLD* is not a factual account of any slice of the space-time continuum on Earth or anywhere else. Names, characters, places, events, incidents, and situations are either the product of the author's warped imagination or are used in a purely and wholly fictitious fashion. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or their otherworldly spirits, or any locales or known objects, is entirely, and without exception, coincidental.



cover art by m. van tryke

*... for my
lovely wife,
SHARON,
who has a
heart of gold.*

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Foreword

Let me tell you a secret - I've known author/raconteur/all-around strange guy Mike Bozart for many years and the man never fails to perplex me. The colorful splotches he calls his art perplex me, his attitude and what he calls "jokes" perplex me – hell, what this man generously calls his life perplexes the hell out of me.

So, when he came to me with his finished novel, *Gold*, I was, of course, perplexed yet again. How this man could take the skittering, scattershot ideas and constantly flickering images that ricochet off the walls of his ever-expanding brain and turn it in to a cohesive work such as a novel, totally made me want to read it immediately. And so I have.

And for once, I am not perplexed. Not only is *Gold* filled with the kind of action-packed excitement and sexual innuendo the poor souls in Hollywood usually need at least three sequels to convey, but the characters have the kind of fully-fleshed out feel only a master writer can offer. I was totally gripped by the story and felt that the characters became part of my life. A tremendous first novel and hopefully one of many to emerge from the mind of this literary madman.

– Scott Homewood, August 2013

Preface

It was another infernally hot and humid July afternoon in Charlotte, but I had this particular Friday off. Having procured a cheap metal detector, some prospector's pans and a spade, I was ready to find gold. Even though I knew that it was the longest of longshots – I knew that no one had found any decent-size gold nuggets in North Carolina in decades (I majored in Geology) – I was so sure that I was going to search the right hundred-square-foot area and strike it rich using the power of sunbaked-brain naïveté.

I was driving east on NC 24/27 (Albemarle Road), heading towards the old Reed Gold Mine while listening to *Charms* by The Philosopher Kings on the radio. (Yeah, I can still recall that day like it was yesterday.) It was the summer of '95. I pulled off the road and parked after crossing the bridge over Rocky River. At that time you didn't get hassled for doing such by the cops. I can't recommend it now.

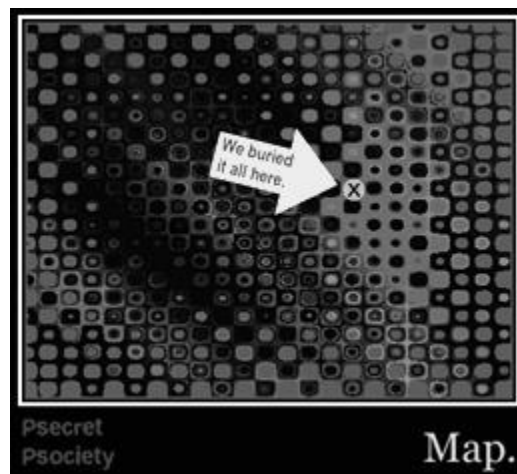
Well, to make a long story much shorter, I just got muddy, bit by at least a dozen mosquitoes and horseflies, and even nicked my foot on some broken glass in the stream. Needless to say, I didn't find any gold.

However, while driving back to Charlotte at sunset, I got the initial idea for this novel. It languished in my brain for some 18 years. *GOLD, a summer story* is the product of this neural fermentation.

Hope you enjoy it. The language is a bit coarse at times and the sexual interludes are somewhat graphic, but I was only staying true to the characters and offering a vivid account.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to duly recognize and sincerely thank Karen-Bodie Bodenheimer (agent 53), Michelle Steiner Spangler (agent 441), Teddi Kierstead (agent 303), Martha Hall Linkous (agent 481), Janet Bensler (agent 205), Charlene Grant (agent 901), H. Loren Brunson III (agent 14), and Steve Davis (agent 546) for their adroit advice, interesting ideas, earnest encouragement, and assorted assistance with this debut novel.



“The desire of gold is not
for gold. It is for the means
of freedom and benefit.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Chapter 1

A hot, moist Thursday evening found things not so cool on the 30-something home front. Mark and Susan's modest two-bedroom east Charlotte home was entering foreclosure. One of their two cars, a four-year-old Nissan Sentra, had just been repossessed last week. Their remaining motor vehicle, a paid-off, eleven-year-old Dodge Neon with 187,781 miles on it, urgently needed a new transmission; sometimes it could barely make it up the driveway.

Another five-figure medical bill had arrived in the mail. There was already a stack of them on the far end of the kitchen counter; the pile was almost four inches high. Somewhere in the stack was a dead, flattened roach that Mark had crushed last Leap Day. Moreover, there was enough financial stress in their home to break the suspended back of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The trouble all started when Susan, who had been healthy her whole thirty-four-year life, got bit by an insect or spider – the doctors never were exactly sure what it was – on a camping trip two summers ago with her female friends in the Green River Cove area of the Pisgah National Forest. As a result, she almost lost her left leg. A combination of antibiotics spared her from an amputation, but her left knee was shot.

Susan hobbled around now. Standing for more than five minutes was hellish torture. As a result, she started taking prescription painkillers. Hydrocodone worked to her satisfaction for the first few months. But then she needed something stronger. It wasn't long before she was popping oxycodone like Mentos candy. Then she got a script for the

time-released version, OxyContin. When she found out that she could crush the pills for a more zonking stupor, it was game over.

Mark tried to intervene, but she was hooked. He would tell her that she needed to get off the pills and find a sit-down office job. She would just give him a lazy smile and retort, “I’m through with pain, baby – done with it.”

They were barely making it when they had both incomes. Without Susan working, things got very tight. Mark started riding his refurbished ten-speed bike to work in downtown Charlotte to save money. It was only 4.8 miles one way and it kept him in shape. He actually grew to like it.

But then there was that frosty March morning when he made the right turn onto the Briar Creek Greenway Bridge a wee too fast. His front tire slid like a hockey puck on the frozen wooden planks. Mark went airborne over the handlebars as the bike crashed into the bridge’s industrial-style metal railing. He had broken his right arm in three places, as well as torn his rotator cuff. When he tried to stand up, he realized that he had broken his right ankle as well. His thoughts were very dour. *When it rains, it pours; when there’s frost, there’s a cost. Why did I take that turn so fast? [sic] I knew it would be covered in frost. There’s always condensation on that bridge in the early morning. What was I thinking? Why was I riding so fast in the first place? I’m thirty-eight years old for crying out loud. I’m too old to act like the Lance Armstrong of east Charlotte.* He re-entertained these thoughts numerous times over the next sixteen months.

As a result of the crash, Mark gave up the bike commute to work. He had to. It was just too much pain for his right ankle, which seemed to be taking forever to heal. He couldn't afford any more doctor visits or medical treatment.

The gasoline savings were gone. And so was the free parking. Mark now had to pay to park downtown, which was a considerable expense; his data-storage company stopped giving him a voucher. "We are in a recession and can't afford this perk anymore, Mark," his boss told him. Something about the bottom line and a recommendation from the accounting department.

They were in the money vise, feeling the maximum squeeze. Mark mused while staring at the dirty floor. *There must be some sideline business that I can do for extra income.* This thought was in repeat mode as of late in his squirming, nearing-panic-mode brain.

Mark started to actively search the dubious *Business Opportunities* listings in print and online. He saw a lot of overt pyramid schemes that would even make Ponzi blush. He passed on them. He remembered one day, while on the toilet in a public bathroom, noticing that all the screw heads were strangely aligned, what an old college friend had told him a decade ago: "MLM = Most Lose Money."

That was true for most people. But, he most certainly was not *most people* – not even close, he thought. He felt certain that he could and would come up with a duplicatable, universal system that even someone with a middle-school education could do successfully. Or, so he told himself day after day.

The company that got the hook in his thin wallet was called InstaBagel. He signed up online to receive a free sample, which came in the mail three days later. The package was very neatly wrapped, and very professional-looking. He thought: *Ah, they must be a first-rate company.*

In the box, they were like hard pretzels. The instructions said to add the special flavor packet to a bowl of tap water, and then to dunk them in the powdered water. The last step: Microwave for forty-five seconds and enjoy! *Seems easy enough.* And, it was.

When he bit into the first one, he was amazed at the taste and texture. They were just like those gourmet-bagel-shop bagels – but at less than half the price. *Who wouldn't want this? I am going to be rich!*

He immediately joined at the *decision maker* level by buying \$500 worth of dehydrated bread. He could see himself rising to the platinum level in just ninety days. He thought to himself: *There's dough in this dough, bro. Big money train, here we go! My revenue-generating ship has arrived.*

However, a year later he had only two active partners in his downline, and had racked up \$38,000 in credit card debt from paying for lunches for prospects and hotel ballroom rentals for bagel-sample fests. His sure-fire plan was a complete bust – a resounding flop.

Now they couldn't even make the interest payments on their credit cards. Soon a new stack of bills began to pile up next to the medical bill stack. And now their phones were being lit

up by the bill collectors all hours of the day and night. Some calls originated from Moldova of all places.

Susan seemed resigned to imminent destitution. But as long as she had a steady supply of oxies – her slang for OxyContin pills, she really didn't care. If the house burned down, they'd find her charred corpse on the couch.

Her mood grew more sullen and distant. She and Mark stopped having sex. Mark didn't physically cheat on her; he went back to porn.

Susan started eating more – more of the wrong foods: the fatty ones. She gained ten, fifteen, twenty pounds. To compound the problem, she wouldn't exercise. She thought that bicycles were just for kids; she thought that running and jogging looked ridiculously stupid; she thought that walking just made you vulnerable to attacks by men and dogs; she thought gym memberships were a waste of money.

The mutual disdain for each other grew by the hour. “Why did you join that stupid bagel scam?” she would often scream. “You worthless MLM junkie!” Mark could hear her tonsils sloshing around. It was primal and beastly. It was pure detestation.

Then while watching the local 6:00 news, Mark started paying attention to a story about the history of gold in the Charlotte region. The reporter was out at the historic Reed Gold Mine, twenty-two miles east of their house in the Merry Oaks residential area of east Charlotte. The Amerasian female was talking about the German boy who found a seventeen-pound gold nugget in a small stream near Midland in 1799. She was

standing on some rocks in the middle of Little Meadow Creek when she said, "Could you imagine finding a gold nugget in a North Carolina creek?" *Boy, could I*, he almost thought aloud. *Did Susan hear me?*

"Can you turn the damn news off?" Susan demanded. "Please change the fucking channel. I'm sick of news, news, news." Susan closed her invective by yelling, "Screw the news!" While sprawled out on their green leatherette couch, she thought: *Why does he have to watch the same news loop fourteen times? What's the point? Life is a horror movie. It sucks. It always has, and always will. You need to numb yourself to it. 'Get it, Mark? You still can't understand that?' What the hell is wrong with him?*

"Ok, what do you want to watch, dear?" Mark asked in angry tone. "Don't tell me that you want to watch the E channel. Watching those worthless, smug, stuck-up, it's-all-about-my-pretty-face celebrities will do nothing to improve our situation. Only a braindead idiot thinks that celebrities care about them." Mark was barking back. Spittle was flying from his mouth. He was becoming enraged. He continued with his tirade. "These conceited, self-important flakes don't give a damn about us! Let me repeat: They don't give a damn about us! Got it now?!" *E has got to be the worst damn time-wasting, unproductive, non-inspiring channel of all time. And of course, it's her favorite. Just my rotten luck. / Why did I ever choose to get mixed-up with him? What a freaking mistake! Worthless loser.*

"At least I get to imagine escaping from this horrible reality that you've created." *Why doesn't he go rob a bank and make himself useful? Heck, he'd probably get caught before leaving*

the parking lot. / Her debilitating addiction is my fault? Un-fucking-believable! Her brain is now opioid mush.

"That I've created? What? You have got to be kidding me!" Why does she always blame me for her own self-induced misery? She's the one sitting on her ass all day popping pills.

"I'm not kidding. And, I'm sick of your stupid-ass, money-losing ideas that go nowhere. I want a divorce!" Wow, I finally said the 'D' word to him. Finally. / Glad she said it first.

"Hey, that is certainly fine by me, my dear ex-wife-to-be. I won't contest it, either, sweetheart. I'd love to be divorced from you and your sour attitude towards everything." The oxycodone has cooked her brain. She's headed for pain-killer casualty-ville, and her ticket is one way. She's not going to get better. I want off this train that has already wrecked and gone off the tracks, and is now sinking in a cesspool.

"Screw you, you damn loser," Susan screamed as Mark slammed the door. What a freakin' drug-addled monster. God, I can't wait to be free of her. Could she just hurry up and die. C'mon, baby, overdose tonight. You can do it. Make things easy for poor Mark. / Gosh, I hope he gets hit by a dump truck!

It was another veritable van Buren evening, always striving for perfect strife. And more often than not as of late, succeeding in spades – spades that could be utilized later.

Chapter 2

After his Ecuadorian wife, Lani, died in a car accident in dense fog, Fred, originally from Maine, became a bit of a hermit. For the past seven years, he had lived alone in a small, white, lapboard-sided, tin-roofed house that was just off of NC 24/27 on Reed Mine Road between Midland and Locust.

Fred's back property line was Little Meadow Creek, the famous gold-nugget-bearing, small, shallow stream that the Amerasian reporter was talking about on the news. It was where America's first gold rush began. It was said that Little Meadow Creek had not a single unturned stone, as thousands of people over the following two centuries had picked through its well-rounded cobbles, hoping to see that lustrous yellowish reflection in the languid water.

Mark would often suggest to Fred that he should buy a metal detector. Fred would just laugh it off and tell him that all of the pieces of loose gold of any appreciable size surely must have been found by now, as the ground had certainly been turned over a hundred times by shovels, picks, plows and bulldozers.

But then one fine day, Fred saw a cheap metal detector at the local discount store. The price was super-cheap, so he went ahead and bought it. He didn't find any gold, but he did find an 1851 three-cent silver in his back yard one Saturday afternoon that yielded twenty bucks at the coin store in Locust.

At 7:02 PM on Thursday, June 21st, the first full day of northern-hemisphere summer in 2012, Mark pulled into Fred's driveway, which curled all the way behind the house to a workshed. The sun was still fairly bright in the hazy

southwestern sky. Mark momentarily stopped about fifteen feet from the wooden outbuilding and looked around. *Where's he hiding? What is Fred up to now? Bet he's making something somewhere.*

Fred's red Ford pickup truck was parked next to the large wooden shed. Mark thought this was a little odd, as he had never seen Fred park it there before. *Why'd he park way down here? Unloading materials?*

Mark parked the Dodge Neon in front of the large shed and walked up to the doors. Fred often worked and hung out back there. The doors were padlocked shut. *Well, he's not in there. Not unless he's the newest Houdini.*

Mark then wandered over to Fred's old Ford F-100 pickup truck. Gnats, flies, mosquitoes and bees were whizzing around his head. He was thrashing his hands at them, nearly smashing the driver's side mirror of the truck. He thoroughly hated hot weather. *Ah, the joys of scummer [sic] are indeed here now. biting, stinging, and flying-into-an-eye insects. When is the first freeze? One hundred and twenty days? October can't get here soon enough. Fast-forward, please.*

He peeked through Fred's darker-than-legally-allowed tinted pickup truck windows. Fred wasn't passed-out in there. The truck's doors were locked. *That's odd ... Fred never locks his pickup truck when he parks it behind the house.*

Mark decided to go knock on the house's rear sliding glass door. There was no answer. The gold-colored curtain was only halfway drawn. He peered inside. *No sign of life in there. Hmmm, where could Fred be?*

Mark then reached in his left-front pants pocket and got his old slider-type cell phone out. He called a longtime common friend named Travis. After three long rings, he answered.

"Hello, is this Mark?"

"Yes, it is, Travis. How are things with you guys?"

"Oh, we're doing ok. We could stand to win the lottery, though. Ha-ha. So, what's up?"

"Well, I'm out at Fred's right now. His truck is here, but he isn't. I tried his cell phone, but no answer – not even an outgoing voicemail message. Do you know where he is, or what the hell is going on?"

"You're out at Fred's place right now?"

"Yes, has something happened?"

"You had better sit down."

"Ok, I'm sitting in his back-deck lounge chair."

"Fred is dead, Mark. I thought one of the old gang had told you. I'm so sorry to be the bearer of the bad news. Fred died of an apparent heart attack yesterday morning while working in his shed." *Damn. That totally freakin' sucks ostrich eggs.*

Mark was devastated and speechless. Fred had been his best bud, the one he ran with the most, and he had been the best man at Fred's wedding. They had partaken in numerous adventures and misadventures on the Albemarle Road corridor of east Charlotte over the past two decades. *How could this have happened? Fred seemed to be in great shape*

for thirty-eight. Not an ounce overweight. Fit as a fiddle. Very active. Even hyperactive.

“Mark, are you still there? Hello? Mark?”

“Yeah, I’m still here, Travis. Just stunned beyond belief. It seems so unreal. Still trying to digest and process what you just said.” *There will never be a next adventure with Fred.*

“I know, brother. It doesn’t get any heavier than this. I had a dream about him last night. He wanted me to help him get out of some dark room. It felt so real. I won’t be forgetting him anytime soon ... probably never.”

“Yeah, man, it doesn’t get any more real than death. I know that I’ll miss him every day, Travis. So many wild and wacky times with him. It feels like a chunk of my psyche has been ripped out and rinsed away.” Mark was staring at Fred’s pickup truck. There was mud in the fender wells. *Looks like he had been off-roading recently. Maybe with Mike?*

“I know, man. All those places. All those crazy situations that he somehow got us into and then got us out of, almost magically. Hey, listen, you had better get out of there. The neighbors and the police are probably still watching the house.”

“Yeah, ok.”

“I mean, really, who wants to be detained and interrogated for something they are oblivious to?”

“I got ya. I’m getting out of here now. Take care, Travis. Send my regards to the misses.”

“Will do. Hey, the memorial service is at Mimosa Funeral Home in Locust on Sunday at 1:00 PM. Fred will be cremated. I guess I’ll see ya there.”

“Ok. Later.” Mark slid his phone shut and just stared out at the swollen creek. Normally you couldn’t see the water from the deck, but it had rained almost two inches the night before. There was a lot of flooding in the low-lying areas, and even some mudslides on the bare slopes.

Mark felt for his sunglasses, which he thought he had hooked through the top buttonhole of his Hawaiian shirt. They weren’t there. *That’s weird; I don’t remember taking my shades off.*

He began to retrace his steps. He walked to the rear shed first. They weren’t there. He walked over to Fred’s pickup truck and began to walk around it. When he was directly behind it, he saw his shades in the tall sweet-flag grass. *They must’ve fallen off when I bent down.*

He put his sunglasses back on and looked towards the roiling creek, just twenty feet away. The motion of the turgid stream mesmerized him as he walked up to the edge of the bank, still thinking about his deceased dear friend. The memories of Fred were freely flowing.

His standing reverie was startled by a sparrow that was trying to scare a crow away from her nest. When he looked back down in that direction, he noticed an undercut section of the grassy bank about fifteen feet upstream. There were a couple of flat stones under an overhang of red-clay earth that had a luminous glow about them in the evening light. He walked

down the creek bank until he was directly across from the yellowish semicircular objects. *Wow, that looks like gold!*

Mark began to take his shoes and socks off. The creek was only about twenty inches deep in the middle. The biggest hazard would be broken glass from the Reed Gold Mine Site, a mile upstream. (The visitors' glass beverage bottles often got shattered on the rocks after they realized they were going home empty-handed.) He would take his chances, even if he didn't have his waterproof flip-flops.

The fast-flowing creek was the color of heavily creamed coffee. As the water rushed over the rounded rocks, numerous small eddies formed. They spun for a while then dissipated. *My life is spinning away, spiraling down in an endless whirlpool. I so need a lucky break, so desperately. Share with me some golden serendipity, cosmic all-knower.*

Mark was wearing his old, frayed, Bermuda-length denim shorts. *I bet that I can cross this creek without getting my shorts wet.* He quickly waded across the stream and reached for the smaller kidney-shaped, gold-colored rock. *Wow, this is heavy as hell! This has got to be at least fifteen pounds. [It was actually sixteen pounds, seven ounces.]* He remembered the Periodic Table as best he could. *That's right – gold is heavy – almost as heavy as lead. This is a good sign. An auspiciously [sic] good sign!*

He recalled the Mohs mineral hardness scale from an introductory geology course that he took his freshman year at Appalachian State University. Pure copper is 3.0 on the scale and pure gold is 2.5. The lower the number, the softer the material. If his copper-plated 2010 penny could not scratch

the yellowish rocks, then they weren't gold. To his anticipatory amazement, the shiny penny left a groove in each slender rock. *Excellent. Gold is slightly softer than copper. We passed the first big test.*

Then he struck them with a hunk of white quartz that was adjacent to it. They didn't break or chip. It just left a depression. *Excellent! It's not pyrite. We're two for two, my boy. We're off to a good start.*

He looked closer and noticed that the quartz strike left a soft indentation, like a skinny bike tire that had passed through some thick mud. *Ah, another great sign: It's malleable. We're batting three for three. Yey! Just one more test. One more at-bat. Don't strike out in the bottom of the ninth with bases loaded.*

He then picked at the thin golden boomerangs, trying to get their surfaces to flake; they wouldn't. *Wow, this isn't mica, either. Wow, we went four for four! I think I've found a stockpile of real gold! My lucky day has arrived at long last! Thank you, Fred, for guiding me here. May your spirit rest in eternal peace, bro. How I wish you were here right now.*

He would cross the creek twice, bringing one half-circle nugget across each time. The larger crescent moon nugget weighed twenty-one pounds, nine ounces. It was heavier and longer than the famous Reed nugget of 1799. *How in the world did these pair of gold nuggets go undiscovered for over two centuries? How did everyone miss them? How did the thousands of rain/flood events over the past two hundred years not expose them?*

The total weight of the two curved nuggets was an astonishing thirty-eight pounds. This stunning pair of golden boomerangs would fetch at least \$1.3 million on the collectors market, as raw nuggets commanded a much higher price – often 20 to 40% higher than the going ounce rate. Since these were going to be famous nuggets – famous enough to be named – Mark knew that he was going to be at the very high end, probably even 50% over the ounce rate. *‘Ladies and gentleman, feast your eyes on the Carolina Count and the Carolina Countess.’* He could already hear it.

Elation was playing on every radio station in Mark’s mind. He was nervously ecstatic. He just hoped that no one had been spying on him as he transported the gold across the stream.

Mark laid the two thin gold nuggets down in the tall grass behind Fred’s pickup. Then he walked up to his blue Dodge Neon and backed it up next to his golden stack. He loaded the pair of curved nuggets in the back of the trunk, laying them on the three-person tent that Susan had left in there from the ill-omened camping trip.

He then rolled the two curved gold nuggets up in the tent and pushed it deep into the trunk, all the way against the back of the rear seat. He looked at it to make sure there was no gold showing or any peculiar bulges. It all looked very ordinary – just a rolled-up camping tent.

Mark closed the trunk softly, started the engine, and slowly exited the driveway. He didn’t see anyone. Though not much of a religious man, he prayed like a priest in a sex-toy shop that no one saw him. *Lord, if you are there, please let me leave unobserved. Grant me safe and unreported passage.*

No one had seen him. He was in the clear. He had been granted his lucky break.

<><><>

The drive back to Charlotte was largely uneventful, yet every mile without a mishap felt like a small victory. Traffic in the inbound direction was fairly light. Mark drove a few miles per hour below the posted speed limits. *Please, no auto wreck tonight. Everyone stay away from my car; I'll stay far away from yours. Faraway. Please don't break down on me tonight, little car. Keep on going, nefarious Neon. Don't fail me now. Don't crap out in the clutch!*

The purple-based, orange-red sunset was surreally awesome, and he was driving right into a slew of curious cumulus faces. *There must've been a lot of dust kicked up today. The gods are cheering for me. I've just won the Giro d' Oro.* He could hear Ennio Morricone's *Ad Ogni Costo* playing in the cloud-story. This parade was for him. He had just hit the grand slam. The gold trophy was his. He had won the golden jackpot.

Staring straight ahead with eyes squinting, he was almost in a trance. *Wow, I'm driving into a new life. I feel different. I can't believe that I found that gold! I won't be mega-rich, but if I play this right, I'll never have a house or car payment ever again. Just don't blow it, Mark. You must stay smart. You still have Susan to deal with. God knows what she's capable of doing.*

The twilight was, in a single word, golden. All of the shadows seemed to have a golden hue. He could not believe his luck. However, his happiness was tinged with sorrow, as he

remembered what Travis told him on the phone: “Our Fred is dead.” It kept repeating in his mind. A vicious loop. How he wished Fred was alive. *I can’t believe Fred is dead. I surely didn’t see that coming. Not a hint of a bad ticker.*

These pristine, uniquely shaped gold nuggets could carry him for the rest of his life if he lived cheaply. And, he was already good at that. He savored the thought of not having any balances owed to any bank.

Both he and Fred were fairly frugal men. He would’ve loved to have shared it with him. He actually wished they would’ve discovered it together. The fun and interesting times they could have had. *That trip to Amsterdam will never happen now. Ah, life is so fickle. So tenuous. So uncertain. So incomplete. So broken. So suddenly severed.*

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When he pulled into the driveway off Arnold Drive, the long shadows were merging together in the advanced twilight. It was almost dark. And so was the house. Not a single light on. Just a muted blue glow from the TV cast on the dusty, off-white, vinyl mini blinds. *Ah, she’s probably passed-out again on the couch.*

Mark unlocked the front door and entered the living room. Sure enough, Susan was lights-out on their thrift-store sofa. She was snoring in three-part disharmony. *I’ll be glad when I don’t have to come home to these sights and sounds anymore. And that day will soon be here – very soon.*

Mark tiptoed past her slumbering body and found the TV’s remote control on the floor. He turned the TV off and went into

the kitchen. He flipped the light switch on and grabbed a Guinness Extra Stout out of the fridge. He wasn't really much of a beer drinker; a six-pack could often last a week or more.

Then he exited the kitchen and retired to their bedroom. He was content to let Susan sleep on the couch until eight or so in the morning. It had become the usual routine.

He began to ponder his golden situation. *When can I get that gold out of the trunk? When will it be safe to make the transfer? Should I just do it now? I could hide it in the shed? No, Susan might wake up, or a neighbor might see me. It's too risky right now.*

He sat on the bed, mindlessly staring out the window through a crack in the secondhand red velvet curtains that Susan had scored from some odd-lots store on Central Avenue. It was now dark outside. Yet, he was able to notice a small sparrow that was silently resting on a dogwood tree limb. Mark continued his gold planning. *Anyway, I'm too tired to move the gold out of the car right now. And, heck, where would I put it? I don't want it anywhere in this house or in the yard. Second thought, the shed is out, too. Nowhere on this property. Susan can't find it. I'll just let it stay right where it is for tonight. It should be safe. I'll go out tomorrow and stash it somewhere. Maybe I'll bury it somewhere in east Charlotte. Yeah, somewhere near the house. The woods behind Evergreen Cemetery would be a good place. Yeah, that's it; I'll take it back there and bury it tomorrow evening. I just need to remember to bring a small shovel.*

After his sixth gulp of beer, he fell asleep on the bed with his clothes on. He forgot to turn off the overhead light. He was

dead-beat exhausted. Sleep came down like a ton of tiny Canadian geese feathers.

He dreamed that Fred saw him find those slender, curved gold nuggets. Fred walked down to him. His face was gaunt and gray. He spoke to Fred, but Fred never replied. Fred just vanished into the stream. He wondered if it was a harbinger as he walked away with the gold boomerangs, one in each hand. A policeman suddenly appeared asking him where he got the two gold nuggets. Suddenly, he was mute in the dream; he couldn't answer. More police arrive. Then he is completely surrounded. He is going to be arrested. He sees the nearest police officer taking the handcuffs from his shiny black belt. The policeman looks at him. He is all business – very serious. But then Fred re-emerges from the stream. He's got a plan. The policeman is suddenly frozen in time; he can't move. Fred points towards the red horizon. They are now being sucked towards the glowing horizon line. Faster. And faster. Mark turns to look back. Earth is disappearing. He looks forward again. Where did Fred go? Mark is falling now. Falling back to Earth. He is falling at a great speed. The impact with the ground will surely kill him. But, he never makes contact with anything. The dream ends in darkness with the sounds of coal being shoveled.

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At 5:22 AM Susan got up to use the bathroom. She noticed the light on in the bedroom and saw Mark sound asleep on the bed. He was snoring some heavy timber. She turned the light off and closed the door. *I'm going to rattle his world. He thinks that he's the only one who can just drive off. Why, I'll show him!*

In the kitchen, Susan found a piece of get-rich-quick junk mail and began to write a message to Mark on the back of the yellow envelope with a black crayon. The entire note read:

Need some time alone.

Going to the beach.

And that was it. Just two simple sentences that didn't even identify the beach she was going to, or when she would return. She thought it was sufficient, though. *This will teach that bastard! Look who is driving off now, Mark. Me – I'm outta here! Have a nice walking weekend, dearest hubby. Ha-ha.*

She gathered a duffel bag of clothes and her handbag, and was out the door at 5:33 AM. The neighborhood was quiet. A black cat slinked across the old asphalt street. When her car key touched the door lock, there was a small spark. *Wow! Static electricity. So unusual for this time of year.*

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Back inside the house, Mark never even stirred as Susan quietly closed the door and drove away. He was still deeply immersed in a jaw-dropping golden dream. He would never know how close he came to swallowing a wolf spider.

Chapter 3

Susan was making good time on the road. She felt unusually clear-headed and alert. Her car windows were down and the 66° Fahrenheit, piedmont morning air was whistling through her jet-black Native American locks.

She cleared Monroe before the Friday morning traffic started getting bad. She was going around Laurinburg on the US 74 Bypass when she heard a text alert on her cell phone. She clicked on the new message icon. It was from Mark; it read:

Which beach are you headed to?
When exactly will you be back?
I need the car this weekend.

Susan sighed and shook her head. She kept driving for another eleven miles. Then she pulled off the highway at the next exit to take a pee and get an energy bar.

In the convenience store parking lot, she composed a reply for Mark; it read:

I will be at Carolina Beach – alone.
You'll be fine without the car this one weekend. Go get stoned with your friends at a hipster bar in Wigwood.

She pressed the Send key and rolled out of the parking lot back onto Highway NC 710. She quickly turned her phone off and threw it into her handbag. She knew Mark would call and/or text back. She was done with him for the next three days. *God, he fucking annoys me.*

Soon she was back on US 74 East, cruising through the Lumber River swamplands. *Wow, it's so green down here, but the river and creek water is black. I'd hate to have this car break down here. Looks like it's full of gators and snakes.*

Then she saw the green mileage sign. *Ah, seventy miles to Wilmington and another fifteen more to Carolina Beach. I should be there in an hour and a half.*

The blue Dodge Neon began climbing the western side of the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge about an hour later. The car's transmission wasn't slipping too badly. *C'mon, baby, you can make it!*

It was a tall vertical-lift-type bridge with personnel offices high above the roadway. *I wonder if the guy who works up there watches porn like Mark. Looks like a lonely-ass gig. Maybe he doesn't work alone. Maybe he's balling some bimbo right now up there. What the hell am I thinking?*

She was so lost in her thoughts that she had started to lane-drift. BEEP! She had almost sideswiped another sedan in the left lane. The well-dressed business lady in the Audi flipped her the bird and mouthed the words: "Fuck you, bitch!"

She got back in her travel lane – completely – and recomposed. *Whew! Damn, that was close. Need to stay focused on the road. Gosh, it would totally suck to wreck this car. Mark would be livid. We'd have no wheels.*

She then glanced over at downtown Wilmington to her left. She remembered a time when she and Mark had spent a romantic weekend in that quaint river city. *The morning brunch at the hip little coffeehouse on Front Street. The nice dinner at the seafood restaurant overlooking the Cape Fear River on Water Street. The evening strolls. What happened to them? Where did it all go wrong? Why did it all go wrong?*

She still loved him at some base level; she couldn't lie to herself. Though, she often did. She just had to get away from him for a while. Absence would make her weary heart grow fonder – or further – she thought. It would be a test – a crucible. She would know by Sunday which way to go.

At the stoplight on the other side of the bridge, Susan made the right turn onto US 421 South for Carolina Beach. She was on the home stretch now. *Yes, we're going to make it.*

As she passed Greenfield Park on the left, she remembered the place where Mark proposed to her. She could see that very cypress tree. It was still there. *So many memories in this area. Maybe I should have gone to a different beach.*

Susan rolled over the concrete humpback bridge that spanned Snow's Cut at exactly 10:01 AM. The Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway glistened below. A section of the water's surface looked like a wise old sage. *What secrets lay in those depths, kind sir? Please do tell.*

She was hungry; she had skipped breakfast. She pulled into the Carolina Beach McDonald's. It was already crowded with

tourists. School had ended two weeks ago, and kids were running everywhere. It was a madhouse.

Susan only ordered a plain biscuit and a small orange juice. She was also going to lose some weight on this beach trip. She was determined to consume fewer calories. *Will power. You can do this, girl. No fried food on this trip. No more French fries. No more fatty foods. No milk shakes! And, nothing with trans fat. Be strong.*

Chapter 4

It was 7:18 AM when Mark read Susan's note on the kitchen table, and 7:29 when he received Susan's curt text reply. Mark decided the best course of action was to trail her down to Carolina Beach. He caught the inbound route 9 CATS bus on Central Avenue a few minutes after 8:00 AM. He had a change of clothes in his black-yellow backpack.

At 8:15 AM he was leaving the Charlotte bus station and walking towards Exceptional Rent-A-Car on East Trade Street. He rented a nondescript 2011 white Ford Focus with unlimited mileage for two days. He signed the papers and was on his way, headed east-southeast. *'Whatever you do, Susan, don't open that damn trunk. Promise me that, my infuriating wife.'*

Soon he was driving on US 74 East, passing under the Briar Creek Bridge at 8:40 AM as a cyclist with an orange shirt crossed over from left to right. *Damn, that cyclist dude sure has a bright orange jersey. Probably for safety. Or, might he be from the Netherlands? A Tennessee alum?*

He was running about two and a half hours behind Susan. Mark drove a little on the fast side, but never more than six miles an hour over the posted speed limit. He couldn't afford another speeding ticket. He couldn't afford the lost time, either.

After passing the sweeping curve on US 74 in Wadesboro known as *the holy roller*, he stopped for an energy drink. Mark

gulped down a Monster Blue Zero and was on his way again. *Ah, now I feel more alive. Susan, my not-so-sweetie, I'm coming for your trunk. No, not for your fat ass – for the gold that you don't even know is in there. I'm closing in, darling. Closing the gap.*

After bypassing Maxton, he couldn't hold it any longer; he had to urinate. He was down to less than sixty seconds. *God, I've got to go like a racehorse! Please let there be a convenience store at this exit. Please. That or I'm going to flood the floorboard.*

By some strange bladder-full twist of fate, his chosen piss stop was the same convenience store on NC 710 that Susan had stopped at, about one hundred and forty-five minutes earlier.

Mark parked the white sedan on the side of the little building and immediately headed for the men's room. He relieved himself and grabbed some pretzels and a Zero candy bar. He used his only viable credit card to pay for the two items.

"Is there a minimum amount for a credit card purchase?" Mark asked the older, white-haired man behind the counter.

"No, no minimum, mate. Your plastic's good here," the clerk-owner stated in a military-like manner.

"Ah, excellent. Thanks." *I should've taken out some cash before leaving. Oh, well.*

“Ah, a van Buren, huh?” the store’s proprietor casually asked as he handed Mark’s card back to him. “You don’t see that last name ‘round here much. Well, not unless you’re in the library reading a US History book.”

“Yeah, it’s Dutch. Pretty rare around here, I guess.”

“Oh, but something that is statistically very odd occurred this morning.”

“Oh?” Mark was genuinely curious.

“You’re the second person that has come into my little store within the past three hours with that last name.”

“Oh, wow. A female? White with black hair?”

“Yep. Your wife, by chance?” The owner’s eyes rose above his bifocals, lending an almost furtive glance.

“Yeah, you got it. She got an early start on our annual beach trip. I had to attend to some business and secure the house. She was eager to get rolling after she downed three cups of coffee.”

“Ah, I hear ya. I know the drill. What beach?”

“Carolina Beach.”

“The wild and raucous party beach.”

“Well, we’ll be the tame ones, I’m sure.”

“Well, have a nice time. Don’t do what I used to do down there in the early ‘70s. Ha-ha ...”

“Ok, thanks. And likewise.” *What did he do down there in the early ‘70s? Did he cruise the beach in a speedo? Was he pumping old wives in the exterior showers? Was he selling/doing dope on the drive-on beach area known as Freeman Park?*

Once back on the highway, Mark became anxious. *Please, please, don’t let her open that trunk. Gosh, I hope I can find our car down there in a trunk-unopened condition. I’ll search all of Pleasure Island if I have to.*

The dashed white lane lines taunted him. He switched the radio to a beach music station. It seemed to have a temporary tranquilizing yet positive effect on his mind. He was confident again that all was going to be fine. *Relax, sport, you will soon be the golden boy.*

Chapter 5

After driving north on Canal Drive and south on Carolina Beach Avenue, looking for a budget hotel with a decent water view, Susan found herself in the Dauphin Reign Motel parking lot. The sign flashed: VACANCY. *I'm here.*

The motel was nothing fancy by any means, but it looked sufficient. Though, it wasn't an interior corridor hotel, which she often chose for safety reasons when lodging alone. But, the beachside location and low price clinched the deal, ending the debate in her head. *Oh, heck, let's try it. I'm tired of driving.*

She went into the modest office and spoke to a middle-aged, white lady. Susan was able to get the last upper-level, oceanfront room for a special two-night rate. It was an end unit, too. Room 120. *Yes, excellent! More privacy.*

The Dauphin Reign Motel only garnered one star on most travel websites, but its Atlantic Ocean view was five stars all the way to Portugal. *Was that dark speck just above the indigo-blue horizon the Rock of Gibraltar?* Her rational mind knew it wasn't, but the vastness of the oceanic view was awe-inspiring and took her breath away.

Maybe it was because the haze was less than normal for this time of year, but her rage towards Mark had subsided. Her mind was clear; her thinking was almost emotionlessly analytical. *I've got a motel room with an amazing ocean and beach view. I'm going to have some fun. Maybe he'll have fun,*

too, in Charlotte. That's fine by me. Go for it, Mark. You can screw all the skanks in NoDa. Just stay in Charlotte.

There was a faint cigarette odor in the room, but she wasn't complaining; she could deal with it. After all, she smoked cigarettes occasionally, especially the green ones. And, yes, she had remembered to stuff the oxies in her large, leather-tasseled handbag. She was all set for mind-and-body sail. *Let the weekend begin! I'm Mark-free and ready to have some fun!*

After placing her change-of-clothes in the old cedar dresser, she went out on the balcony to survey the beach scene. There were some real hunks out there. There were also a lot of bikini-clad, young things, too. *Gosh, their boobs are so damn perky! Oh, to be nineteen again.*

Even being twenty-two pounds above her ideal weight, Susan didn't look half-bad in her one-piece, Mars-black swimsuit. She looked at herself in the mirror and popped an OxyContin pill. *Let's do this!* Then she grabbed the beach towel, her handbag and the old-style hotel key and headed for the sand and surf. *Who knows what fun awaits? Let's put our token on the board.*

Susan found a spot in front of her room near the high-tide line. It was almost dead-low tide at the moment. She laid her 5'-5" body down on the towel, propping up her upper torso with her arms bent behind her back. Her head was hardly moving, yet she was scanning the whole scene behind her dark, poker-grade sunglasses as only a woman can. She began to apply

some sunscreen to her legs, arms and face. *I don't want to look like a lobster on day one. A bad case of sunburn would definitely ruin the whole weekend.*

There was a game of touch (American) football going on to her left. The players were dashing, athletic, white guys in their early 20s. Shirts against skins. Four against four. *Lots of testosterone specimens darting around. Would love for them to 'train' me.*

After the shirtless team of four scored a touchdown, this bronze-tanned, thin yet muscular, tall lad kicked off to the shirted team of four. He caught a glimpse of Susan as he punted the football with maximum force. He hit it flush. Pow!

Susan heard the impact of his foot striking the football. *Wow!*

The pointed-oval, pigskin ball went sailing with the long-shore sea breeze, coming to rest on Susan's towel, right next to her left leg. *Gosh, that was close. That damn ball almost hit me. He should be more careful. Ah, he's probably wasted. No adult-life worries yet.*

The errant kicker walked over to Susan to retrieve the football. "I'm sooooo veeery sorry, ma'am."

"It's ok. No harm done." *Jeez, he's drunk or wasted on pills. I wonder if he could get it up if I seduced him.*

"Miss, you suuuure are pretty." He almost fell over as he gesticulated with his hands. "What's your name?"

“Why, thanks so much for the compliment. You look quite studly yourself. My name is Susan. What’s yours?” *It’s working. This will be easy. I just need to lure him away from his friends.*

“Studly? How cool. Oh, wow, I think I looove you. My name is Rick. Slick Rick with the big dick.” *What the hell did he just say?!* He was mildly laughing. “Huh-huh.” *Sheez, this guy is proudly toasted. What a loon!*

“Ah, you’re just saying that.” Susan flirtatiously grinned at him ... and then looked at his crotch. *What a nice package.*

“No, I reaaaaly mean it. I’d like to spend some primo time with you, Suuusan.” *He’s definitely not bashful.*

“Rick, are you high on something?” Susan hoped that she didn’t sound like his mother.

“Just the Spice o’ Life, Miss Suuusan.”

“And, what spice might that be, Rick?” *Please don’t answer ‘variety’ – not that.*

“Oh, SyntheSpice, synthetic marijuana. I drink less when I use it and it won’t show up in my piss tests.”

“Be careful with that stuff, Rick. Some people have had seizures and died on it.” *Gosh, I probably sound like his older sister or brother, but that stuff is dangerous.*

"Now, dearest Suuusan, do I look like *some people*? Heh-heh." *Gosh, that sounds like something Mark would say.*

"No, I guess you look like *the person*," Susan said almost cryptically.

"I'm the man with the big one-eyed snake." *Gosh, that's so junior high. But with his expression, it works. He's way too goony to really be consciously arrogant.*

"Well, how big is it, Rick?" She was enjoying their saucy banter. She glanced at his feet. *Large and long.*

"Oh, man, it's like waaaay big, Suuusan." He was so intoxicated, but she didn't smell much of an alcohol odor. *Can he really perform in such an inebriated state?* But then Susan saw his member bulging to life and her doubts were quelled.

"Hey, let's go to my room, and I'll measure your wonder worm." Susan winked at him. *Gosh, this is too easy. What am I doing? This is crazy. I love it!*

"Hell yeah! Let's go. I'm ready to rock out with my cock out." Rick gave her a big smile. He was so charming, yet so goofy acting. *This guy is unbelievable! I've never met a guy like him. Is it just because I'm nearly twice his age? Is it my 'maturity'?*

Rick then turned to face the other seven footballers who were waiting patiently for him to return with the football and continue playing. He almost fell into Susan as he announced to them:

“Half-time, my bros. I’ll be back in twenty. Grab a cold one and chill. It’s all good.”

Susan gathered up her beach towel and handbag, and they headed back up the trail between the sand dunes to her motel room. Rick even grabbed her hand in his like they were in a relationship. *How romantic of him. This guy is too much.*

Susan could feel the OxyContin kicking in as she shuffled her feet through the hot sand. Her left leg rubbed against Rick’s right leg. *Pure muscle. I bet he can pump like a wild beast.*

Chapter 6

Mark only had to drive around Carolina Beach for a dozen minutes before he spotted their electric-blue Dodge Neon at Dolphin Lane and Carolina Beach Avenue. Susan had parked it at the sidewalk side of the motel parking lot. It was in plain view of the street. *Thanks for making this easy, my no-longer-so-dear wife. Thank you so very much, my tart tart.*

Then it hit him like a ton of molten lead being forced through a catheter into his spine: *I don't have the car keys! Either I forgot them, or Susan took my set. This is just fucking great! This would only happen to me! Goddamit! Why are the gods always against me getting ahead? ... always against me getting anywhere in this forsaken life?*

Then Mark took a deep breath and started to calm down. His heart rate slowed. He thought about whether or not Susan had his car keys, and concluded that she must have taken them either by mistake or just to be even more spiteful. Either way, he was 99.99% sure that she had them on her person or in her motel room. *Ok, my brain is working again. C'mon, Mark, figure this out. Think, think, think!*

Mark started to assess the situation. *She must have checked into that motel. Either that or she would risk having the car towed. She's not that stupid. Susan parks cautiously. She must have a room in that motel. She must. But, which one? Do I just sit out here for hours on end waiting for her door to open? Jeez, there has to be a better way to get those car keys.*

Mark was parked on Dolphin Lane, staring at their blue Dodge Neon when he had that light-bulb-flashing moment he so desperately needed. *If she has a room in that motel, she probably has a motel parking pass on the dashboard or visor of the Neon. It may have her room number on it. They have to have some way to identify their motel guests from the non-guests, as parking spaces are at such a premium this time of year on the beach. The parking sharks are always hunting for free spaces. They must have some way to control their ungated parking lot.*

With that thought dangling by a neuron, Mark stepped out of the rental car and casually walked over to the blue Dodge Neon. He saw the nick in the driver's side armrest. He also saw Susan's hair brush on the console. *Well, that's definitely our Neon. No doubt about it.*

He then looked at the dashboard. There it was on the passenger side: a small white placard that clearly stated in bold block letters:

Dauphin Reign Motel
Guest Parking Pass
Room 120, vehicle 1

Parfait! Thank you, Buddha! Praise to you, Krishna.

Mark then looked up at the second-level exterior doors. He saw number 120 on the far-right end. *So, that's where she is with the trunk key. On the far end in room 120. I won't be forgetting that number.*

Mark walked back across the street to the Ford Focus and sat in the driver's seat, contemplating his next move. *Alright, what do I do now? I seem to have hit another impasse. I know for sure that I've found the right Neon. And, I know her room number. But, so what? I can't just kick her motel door in. And, I damn sure won't be knocking on it.*

He watched as the Latina cleaning lady made her way past the upper-level rooms. She had just started to clean room 119; room 120 would be next. *What if I could somehow sneak into room 120 after the cleaning lady opens the door? Ah, but our Dodge Neon is here. Susan's probably in the room passed-out from those damn pills. Well, it's a long-shot, but that's the only shot I have at the moment. Other than just confronting her. And even if I confronted her and asked for my keys, she would most certainly refuse to give them to me. If I got them by force, she would call the police and have me arrested. I know she would. I've got to get the car keys from her in a clandestine manner; she can't know that I took them. She can't see me.*

Mark had noticed that the cleaning lady had a set routine. She would first knock on the door and announce herself. If no one answered, she would unlock the door. *Yes, I can find out if Susan is in that room.*

She would first go into the bathroom in the back of the room. She would gather and replace the towels. Next, she would clean the sink, toilet and tub. Then she would put new soap bars and shampoo bottles out. Next, she would wipe down the

refrigerator and microwave. Later, she would do some dusting of the furniture. Then she would round up all the trash and replace the liners. Lastly, she would change the bed linens. *Wow, there are opportunities to get into that room if she is not in there right now. It's worth a try. What else am I going to do?*

Mark walked back over to the motel and looked around. He didn't see anyone. He scurried up the steps to the upper level, avoiding a sight line to the office. *I hope no one saw me.*

The cleaning lady was almost done with room 119. He stopped at the vertex of the second-level L-shaped exterior corridor. The moment of truth was quickly approaching. *I must act quickly and decisively. Hesitation equals failure.*

The cleaning lady emerged from room 119 and closed the door. She began to knock on room 120. *Are you in there, Susan? Oh, once-sweet-but-now-quite-sour Susan, are you oxied out of your gourd?*

The cleaning lady knocked three times and waited. Nothing. "Hello, this is housekeeping. Anyone in there?" She waited three long seconds for a reply. Nothing. She repeated her announcement. Still nothing.

She then reached for her keys in her blue smock's front pocket. She began to open the door to room 120. *Ok, she's not in there. I wonder where she went. Oh well, it really doesn't matter right now.*

She entered room 120 and walked back to the bathroom.

Mark immediately launched himself forward like a track sprinter, and quickly strided the thirty-three feet to the threshold of the door. He peeked in. *No Susan. No maid.*

The cleaning lady was still in the bathroom. He heard her flush the toilet. *Well, this is my chance. It's now or never. Time to slide and hide.*

Mark quickly slid under the queen-size bed like a sly, sly salamander. He quietly positioned himself under the middle of the box-springs. The comforter hung only two inches off the floor. *Don't look under here today, ma'am. Please don't. Not today. Any other day for safety reasons, just not this time.*

After eight minutes of cleaning and restocking, the cleaning lady made her last entrance into the room and exited. She never looked under the bed; she never knew Mark had entered the room. *May you have a great life, dearest cleaning lady. May your wildest dreams come true. May you win the lottery. May you find gold somewhere, too.*

However, the front door was still open. He could see the sunlight on the brown carpet. *What's the delay? Just close the damn door. Please close the freakin' door! Now!*

Mark then heard multiple footsteps on the concrete exterior corridor. Next, he overheard a conversation just outside the doorway. The cleaning woman was addressing some motel guests. *Ok, just close the door.*

"I cleaned your room for you," the Latina housekeeper said demurely with a slight Mexican accent.

"Oh, thanks so much," Susan said. "I really appreciate that. It looks great." *Oh, my long lost Zeus, it's Susan! She is right there, and she's coming in! Oh, my dozen demigods of despair! What terrible freakin' timing. I'm stuck here under this bed.* Susan entered the motel room.

"No problema, señorita," the cleaning lady said as she pushed her cart away. She had noticed that Susan's fingers were ringless.

Next, Mark heard a young man's voice. "Have a nice day, ma'am." *Who the hell is that?*

Then the door closed. Susan and Rick were now in the room. They were giggling like mischievous school kids who were up to no good. And up was good.

Susan sat on the bed. The box-springs bent down and slightly touched Mark's nose. He slowly turned his head sideways. He saw Rick's sand-encrusted, size-thirteen feet on the carpet at the left side of the bed.

"So, Rick, I think you have something that you want me to measure," Susan suggested impishly.

"Why, I most certainly do, Susan," Rick gloated.

Then Mark saw Rick's neon-green swimming suit trunks drop to the floor around his ankles. *What in the world!*

"Wow, you have an amazing cock, Rick. Your dick must be at least nine inches long!" *Oh, my lord! Help me, sweet Jesus.*

"Thanks, Susan. They call me the *nine-inch nailer* back on campus." Susan smiled. *I'm sure they do.*

Susan was now feeling Rick's manhood in her right hand. She began to cautiously caress the shaft. It was now fully extended and as hard as a lead pipe. She fondled his balls. "You suntan in the nude, don't you, Rick?" *This is unbelievable! What a worthless whore she's turned out to be!*

"Yeah, I do," Rick somewhat sheepishly admitted.

"Well, you got one pretty prick there, young man," Susan ceremoniously announced. "Three-fourths of a bronzed foot. I'd be proud of that tumid tuber, too."

"Would you like to taste it?" Rick caught Susan's eyes, then lowered his. *No, you're kidding me.* Mark almost coughed.

"Would I? You bet!" And with that Susan began to oralize Rick's swollen member.

Mark could hear Susan's mouth slurping on Rick's love rod. *What a total tramp!*

After about five minutes of felatio, the cunning cunnilingus commenced. Rick began to eat Susan out on the bed. She was starting to moan. Sublime sensations were flowing. She was really enjoying it.

Mark was still under the bed, barely breathing. *This could only happen to me. But, I'm glad this is happening. It puts the final nail – the nine-inch nail – in the coffin of our marriage. I'll make sure that she never gets a single cent of that gold. Zilch for you, you fuckin' strumpet!*

Then there was a weight shift on the mattress. Apparently Susan was kneeling on the bed. Rick's feet were back on the carpet where they were ten minutes ago. He began to pump Susan doggie-style. Mark was actually getting aroused and almost began to masturbate. *I'll have to put this episode in my book someday when I'm far from her, living on some island, comfortable but stark-raving mad.*

"Are you ready for the full frenzy, Susan?" *Fuck her to death, Rick! Give her a fatal hemorrhage!*

Mark's fingers, toes, and teeth were all clinched. *Un-fucking-believable!*

"Sure, Rick, let me have it! Don't hold back. I can take it. I won't break." *You're something else, sweetheart – a worthless whore.*

Mark's head was crumpled under the box-springs in a sideways position. *Hell is real, and it's right here.*

Rick cleared his throat and then began to furiously pound Susan's vagina like a dildosaurus on crack. The pace was fabulously frenetic. Susan was screaming in ecstasy. Loudly. Rick just hoped that the mattress and box-springs would not slide off the bed frame.

Mark inaudibly groaned. *What a freakin' day!*

"Fuck me harder, Rick. Faster. Harder. Deeper. Ram it all in. Do it now!" *What a complete slut!*

Mark watched the heels of Rick's feet move so slightly up and down. *Un-fucking-believable!*

Rick didn't disappoint. He approached 160 PPM (pumps per minute). *Wow, what a power pumper!* Susan was quite impressed with his piston action.

Then Rick climaxed, unloading on Susan's partially tanned back. *Thank God he pulled out; I think I'm fertile. That was risky. But, wow, it sure felt great.*

Susan, still tingling, yet totally exhausted, collapsed on the bed. Rick bent over and kissed her on the forehead. Susan sighed. *Fucking Trollop!*

Mark was fit to be tied, or compacted.

"I'd love to stay with you, Susan, but I've got to catch up with the guys on the beach or I'll miss my ride back to Charlotte,"

Rick said as he put his swim suit back on. "Unfortunately, our week at the beach ends in less than an hour. My time is up, dear lady." *Spare me, dude.*

"Oh, you live in Charlotte. Whereabouts?"

"Up near UNCC. I graduate in early December. Civil Engineering. Pipes and tunnels." *Oh, what a cute analogy. Might we be minoring in English poetry, too?*

Yes, Mark was seething.

"Wow, I live in Charlotte, too. Over on the east side. Me and my husband are estranged. Obviously. Ha-ha." *Yeah, it's so funny. Gimme a break, Susan.* "Say, could I avail your erotic services at a future date, sexy maestro of maidens?" *Sure, you can both screw each other's brains out. Go for it, Susan. I could care less. I'll never touch your vile body again. Hell, screw the whole island! Get AIDS and die!*

"Sure, Susan. What's your phone number?"

Susan then told Rick her ten-digit number.

Rick clumsily entered the digits into his smartphone and clicked Save. "Grazie!"

He kissed her one last time on the lips and was gone.

Susan just lay on the bed thinking that her marriage was indeed over. *How will Mark take it when I file for divorce?*

Would he contest it? Will he go ballistic? No, he wants out, too. I know he does. The loathing is mutual.

Then Susan's mind shifted to her health. *He didn't wear a condom! What if he has some STD? Oh, my God! What if he has AIDS? He's probably fucked all of the diseased skanks on campus. If I get some disease, I'll probably die ... and deserve it.*

Susan fell asleep. Mark could hear her snoring. *Oh, fuckin' great! She's fallen asleep. Jeez-us, how long do I have to stay jammed under this goddam bed?*

Susan woke up twenty-three minutes later feeling rejuvenated and refreshed. She loved post-coital naps the best. She proceeded to the shower. Mark heard the water hitting the vinyl shower curtain. *Ah, finally!*

Mark slithered out from under the bed. He saw Susan's handbag on the dresser. He lurched up, grabbed it, and returned to his crouched position beneath the height of the mattress. *Just take a long hot shower, honey. Try to wash all that filth off.*

He looked in her handbag and saw his car keys. He started to grab them, but then thought to look for Susan's car keys. *She's probably using my set of car keys. She'll know something's up if they're not here. I bet she forgot that her car keys are in this hidden pocket.*

Sure enough, Susan's car keys were in the small pouch. He removed them and zipped the little pouch back shut. He put her car keys in his right-front pants pocket, stood up, dashed to the door, and looked back. Susan was still in the shower.

Mark cautiously turned the silver doorknob and exited the room. He shut the door so quietly that Susan never heard a sound. *Perfect. Susan has no idea that I was under that bed during her sausage session.*

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Mark walked briskly over to his rented car. He was nine minutes over on the meter. VIOLATION was flashing. *Whew! No parking ticket.*

He jumped inside and drove away. Mark headed for the main drag, Lake Park Boulevard/US 421. An orange-shirted cyclist passed by. *That looks like the same guy that I saw in Charlotte? No way. No fucking way.*

At the stoplight, his mind went into high gear. *I need to get a cheap motel somewhere close by, but not too close.* When he saw the Mt. Bourbon Inn on Harper Avenue, he knew that this place would do the trick. He checked in and got a room on the first level.

He looked around before entering his room. *This is perfect; it's off the congested North End, yet less than a mile away from our car – my gold. Susan doesn't know what kind of car*

I'm driving anyway. So, no big deal if the rental car is in plain sight. Hell, she doesn't even know if I'm down here or not.

Upon entering the room he flopped down on the double bed, and was out like a sinking sandbag for two hours. He had a vivid dream of some vicious sci-fi creature chasing him through an old multi-shafted gold mine. It appeared that it was only the creature and him in this abandoned subterranean underworld.

In the dream, the ferocious green creature did everything it could to prevent him from escaping with the large gold nugget that he had clasped between his hands. It was always trying to barricade him in a dead end. Suddenly the creature was right behind him in an old horizontal shaft. He ran as fast as he could, even faster than humanly possible at times. He was leaping over thirty-foot gaps with ease. But, the creature was still closing the gap.

When the creature finally had him cornered and was about to fatally attack him, he hurled the large gold nugget at its head. It was a direct hit. The gold mine troll was history. Unfortunately, so was the massive gold nugget. Both the troll and the gold nugget fell hundreds of feet down a vertical shaft. He never heard either hit the bottom.

Mark would only remember nuggets of this dream.

Chapter 7

At 6:45 PM Susan was feeling hungry. She walked over to The Sea Twitch Restaurant, which was just down the street from her motel room. She got a table in the corner where she wouldn't feel like she was *that* lady eating alone. She ordered a shrimp dinner – broiled – as she would try to stick with her reduced-fat, low-calorie, weight-loss plan. For a beverage, it was just bottled water. She already knew that coastal tap water was a special kind of nasty.

Fifteen minutes later the food came. It was good and filling. As she began to eat, she noticed a guy who looked like Mark eating with a friend. Susan's mind drifted back to Boone (North Carolina).

She recalled that night they went sledding at Hardin Park Elementary School. There was a nice, gentle one-hundred-yard-long run beside the school. They doubled on Mark's fast plastic-bottomed sled. She remembered him holding her tight. She felt so safe. *How did it all go wrong?*

The exceedingly debonair, young waiter returned and asked if she wanted dessert. She declined. She was now ready for an alcoholic drink.

Susan closed out her bill and headed to the tiki bar in the back. A local rock band was tuning up. *Wow, the bass player looks pretty hot. I wonder how big his penis is.*

She ordered a Zombie mixed drink. She wasn't sure what kinds of alcohol were in it, but it was hitting the spot. Soon the

sound check was over and the six-piece band was playing a mixture of classic rock and alternative covers. They sprinkled in a few power ballads.

The room was beginning to fill up with a mix of locals and tourists. The band was finding their groove. In Susan's mind, the guys were hitting all the right notes, especially the bass player with the dirty blonde mullet. *God, I want him.*

She clapped earnestly after every song. She had another Zombie. Half-way through her drink, she winked at the bass player like a boy-crazy teenage girl. He winked back at her and wiggled his tongue between his left index and middle finger. She knew what that meant. He wanted to feast on her vulva. *Wow, who knows how this night will end up? What a vacation! Do I really have to leave? Maybe I can extend it.*

The tunes and the hours flew by. She began to pulse and gyrate with the beat. She finished her fourth Zombie. She was completely sauced. *I wonder if I can walk. Thank God, I didn't drive. I'd never make it out of the parking space.*

Then the lead singer of the band made an announcement: "Well, folks, this is our last song. We thank you for coming out to The Sea Twitch tonight. Enjoy your weekend here at Carolina Beach. Don't forget to tip your bartender, waiters and waitresses."

When the song ended, the bass player made his way over to Susan's two-seater cocktail table. He was going in for the kill. He smelled an easy good time.

“Do you always drink alone, miss?” he asked in a most nonchalant manner.

“Only when I’m waiting for my man,” Susan countered with a drunken lisp.

“And, where is your man?”

“I think I’m looking at him right now.” Susan peered into his dark blue eyes and smiled, almost menacingly.

He smiled back. “My name is Greg – Greg Tussle. What’s yours, fair maiden?”

“Suuuuusaaaan.” She was drunk.

“Do you live around heeere?” He was drunk, too.

“Next door ... well, for one more night.” Susan was trying to hold her head up, but her left elbow slid off the table. She just smiled.

“Oh, you’re staying alone in a motel down heeere?”

“Yep, The Dauphin Reign Mooo-tel. Room one-twenty. Could you walk me home, big boy?”

“I’d be glad to, Miss Susaaan.” Greg was licking his chops. If he could only get his limp rod up, it was going to be an easy score.

Greg paid her bar tab and walked – and at times almost carried – Susan the two blocks back to her motel room. They almost fell over the hood of a parked car on the way. They finally were able to stagger up the motel stairs, successfully arriving at the landing, giggling like school kids on their first drunk.

Susan's right hand fumbled about in her handbag, finally finding the motel room key. When she got the door open, it was 12:49 AM. Greg was semi-erect by 1:11 AM.

Chapter 8

Mark didn't want to risk being seen in a restaurant by Susan. So, he just drove over to the Sea Merchants grocery store on Cape Fear Boulevard and picked up some frozen food to heat in the microwave back at his motel room. The store was only a few blocks away, and it was on the same side of US 421 – not on the North End side where Susan's motel was.

As Mark passed along the cold-beer aisle, he paused. *Oh, why not. Might as well celebrate a little after that horrendous and humiliating ordeal.* He grabbed a six-pack of Guinness and proceeded to the cash register.

The white, mid-30s, female cashier had that quintessential Carolinas' beach look: dyed blonde hair, even though her hair was naturally blonde; overdone tan, bordering on mutant; ridiculous boob job, appearing to be softball implants; white short shorts, two sizes too small. And for some odd reason, she was curious to know more about him.

"Down for the weekend?" she asked like a small-town detective trying to crack a missing-dog case.

"Yeah, just doing the annual beach visit. How did you know I was a tourist?"

"Oh, we locals can spot you guys a mile away."

Mark chuckled. "Is that so? Well, have a nice evening."

"You, too, mysterious stranger." What did she just call me? Is there something weird about me? ... or, is this place just totally whacked?

Mark drove back to his hotel room. He cooked his frozen pasta dish in the microwave, wolfed it down, and popped open a Guinness. *How will this night go?*

He looked through the slits in the old, wide-style, metal blinds. The TV was on CNBC. The price of gold was going up. And, the sun was going down. It was 8:08 PM.

Mark heard the old refrigerator's compressor kicking back on. He became lost in thought as he sipped his Guinness Extra Stout beer. *Well, boy, tonight's your night. You can't screw this up. This is prime time. This night will determine the rest of your life. Well, possibly. There's no margin for error. You have to extricate those two boomerang-shaped gold nuggets from the Dodge Neon trunk, and place them in the trunk of the Ford Focus without Susan – or the police – or anyone, for that matter – noticing. Zero tolerance for being seen.*

He looked at the kitchen clock. *When would be the best time? hmmmmm ... Midnight? No, she might be out drinking in a local bar and return about then. 3:30? Yeah, that should be a safe time. Still plenty dark, and just about the whole island will be asleep. The bars close at 2:00. Gosh, I hope I can stay awake that long. I'll make some coffee. Yeah. I'll put the beer drinking on hold. If I'm the least bit drunk, I know I will fuck up this operation. I can't blow it. Not this one. Not this time.*

The room came with complimentary coffee packs and a cheap coffee maker. He plugged it in, loaded it up, and got it brewing. He was sipping his first cup o' java as darkness fell on the barrier island.

He began to think back to when he first met Susan at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee. She was just an 18-year-old freshman; he was a 21-year-old senior, almost 22, at Appalachian State University in Boone. *It almost seems like a different life.*

Mark and some college buddies were doing some hiking in the Nantahala National Forest. One of the guys wanted to see his sister, who was attending WCU. The friend of the sister was Susan. Sparks and rockets flew when they first made eye contact. Those were some fun times. *Gosh, she looked so hot in those spandex hiking shorts that day. Where is that day? Does it still exist in some alternate universe?*

Mark reminisced about the first time he visited Susan's parents on the Cherokee Indian Reservation in Qualla (just north of the intersection of US 74 and US 441). *It was such a perfect fall day. That simple log cabin. They were so proud of Susan. The 3.98 high school GPA. The academic scholarship to WCU. The first one in her clan's lineage to attend college. A model commuter student. Never goofing around with any boys. A bookworm, really. And now we're at this space and time ...*

Susan wasn't totally shy, but she kept to herself. She had never dated anyone before Mark.

Mark recalled how Susan's mother was so keen; she could always see the real problem. Her dad was such a hard worker, driving a logging truck on those dangerous mountain roads, even during icy conditions in the dark, cold winter. He had to put the chains on the tires himself, despite having an essentially nonfunctional left arm, the result of a breech birth.

Mark remembered having a drink of moonshine with him one spring evening many years ago. He loved that stuff to the chagrin of his wife. He would say the damndest things.

"Mark, where do you think we go after we die?" her dad had asked him out of the blue.

Mark just blurted, "No idea, sir." He was just being honest.

Her dad then talked about transitions, phases, and continuation. He closed with, "Don't be afraid of death. It's just the start of another journey in another realm."

He remembered how he would sit back and grin and repeat, "Yeah, remember that?" This was usually around midnight. It didn't matter if your statement was about something in the past, present or future – the reply was going to be, "Yeah, remember that?" That's when Susan's mom would tell him to get back in the house. She was never amused.

Mark's mind had drifted almost three hundred miles west of where he was. But then his cell phone chirped. It was the text-received audio notification. And just like that, his thoughts

were right back at Carolina Beach in an instant. The brief text read:

Message 456

Your payment of \$89.05 has
been credited to your account.
Thank you for your business!

Whew! I thought that was Susan. Mark sighed with relief, and walked over to the coffee maker. He poured cup number two and sat down by the side window. He saw headlights drifting by. Some loud tourists were walking on the sidewalk.

He then glanced at the TV. He flipped through the channels, stopping on The Weather Channel. No rain forecast for tonight or tomorrow. *Excellent! I'd hate to have to do this trunk transfer in the rain. That would suck goose eggs, regally!*

Then he twisted in the chair and let his chin rest on his right hand. *Do I really need to move the gold from the Neon to the Focus tonight? If Susan hasn't opened the trunk yet – which it certainly appeared that she hadn't by the way she acted with her male hookup – then why would she open the trunk before returning to Charlotte? Couldn't I just go back to Charlotte and wait for her to return with the gold in the Neon's trunk? Then I could remove those gold fillets on our own property at a time of my choosing. Am I making this more urgent, more difficult, and more risky than it need be? Think, Mark, think.*

However, this line of thinking was almost immediately T-boned in its tracks by another train of thought as a horn beeped. *No, don't be stupid, Mark; don't let this chance to be*

bill-free slip away. Imagine, no more debt! None. Nada. Nil. Zilch. Paying cash for a modest house. No mortgage ever again. Paying cash for a new vehicle – that cool electric one – with no monthly payment. The gold is right there – its current location is known. If you go back to Charlotte all kinds of things could happen. One, the car could break down at any mile on the return trip. It's a wonder that it made the two-hundred-ten-mile journey down here without crapping out. If it should break down, at some point, invariably, the trunk will be popped open by Susan or a mechanic. Two, what if Susan buys a large item and/or wants to hide something from potential thieves? Guess where she will likely put it? In the trunk! Three, what if she runs over some broken glass and gets a flat tire. Pop goes the trunk! There are broken beer bottles all over the curbs down here. Four, what if all she does is open the trunk for a second just to see if the tent is still in there? Another losing situation. She'll wonder why the tent is all wadded-up and pushed to the back of the rear seat. Next, she will pull it out. Heck, what if she wants to go camping at the state park? Voila! Susan will be the golden girl; I'll be the dim-witted dunce once again. And, I'll never be able to go back in time and replay the scenario. She'll haul off with the gold and never return to Charlotte. She'll taunt me with postcards from Paris.

Mark heard a siren passing. It sounded like it was a few blocks west, somewhere in the neighborhood. Probably a drunken domestic dispute, he supposed. He was nervous. He reached for his mug of coffee. It was a quarter full and lukewarm.

He headed to the kitchenette area, ditched the stale, old java and poured another cup. It was 9:59:59 when he flipped the

TV to the local 10 o'clock news. He watched the tall, blonde-haired, Caucasian, female news anchor as she recited the lead story:

"A Greensboro man was caught onboard the Fort Fisher-Southport Ferry tonight with twelve pounds of highly processed cocaine on his person. This is the largest coke bust in New Hanover County in the past three years." *Well, possessing gold is not illegal anymore. At least I have that going in my favor. If I did get pulled over and searched, what could they do? 'Yeah, it's gold, officer, and it's in my rented car's trunk – so what?' 'Well, sir, where did you get it?' 'I found it.' 'Where did you find it?' 'Why do you have to know where I found it?' 'If you found it on private or government property, then it's not legally yours; we'll have to take it from you.'* Mark soured on this train of thought and actually frowned.

Mark looked at an ultra-thin, vertical crack in the wall. *Has there been seismic activity down here? I thought that the only earthquake area in the coastal Carolinas was in the Charleston vicinity.*

He then got up and examined the crack closer. It was actually a long strand of black human hair. *That's either a first-rate optical illusion, or I'm losing my mind.* Mark feared the latter might be the correct answer.

He flipped the channel to ESPN. An international soccer game was on. They called it a friendly, but cleats grinding into ankles didn't look so amicable. It was Germany vs. Russia. The second half had just started. The score was 1-1. It looked like

the game was being played in the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California. He noticed the characteristic wide shallow bowl shape of the single-tier stadium and saw some palm trees blowing in the breeze. It was a signature SoCal scene. He turned up the volume and focused on the match.

“Schweinsteiger. Müller. To Özil. Over to Gómez. Back across to Schweinsteiger. He dribbles to his right and turns. Schweinsteiger from distance with power. He scores! Oh my, what a blast! Schweinsteiger goes top-left shelf from twenty-six yards out in the eighty-ninth minute. Shades of Giovanni van Bronckhorst there, Jim. That was a laser-guided long-range missile that found its Deutsch Mark.” *Schweinsteiger. That’s about as German as it gets.*

Mark remembered their trip to Los Angeles. That was when a new Susan emerged – one that he didn’t like. She was never happy on that trip, no matter where they went, or what they did. *What did she want? Why couldn’t she be happy? We had a nice middle-class life in America. Ninety-plus percent of the globe would kill for our lifestyle. How did such a dirt-poor Native American girl come to feel that she was entitled to a gilded jet-set lifestyle? Where did it come from? Most certainly not from her parents; they were happy with virtually nothing.*

Well, these were Mark’s thoughts. You can be sure that Susan’s thoughts on the matter were a bit different. Very much different.

The ebb and flow of the soccer players going back and forth in waves on the TV screen lulled his mind into a more relaxed,

less panicked state. He took another sip of his black-jolt liquid. He could feel the caffeine. He had drunk enough; he needed to stop. He wasn't going to fall asleep anytime soon, maybe not for twenty-four hours. His pores were wide open. So were his eyes when he glanced at the dresser mirror. *Man, I look wigged-out as hell.* He felt restless.

Mark got up and walked around the bed. *I should drive by the Neon to make sure it's still there. Or, wait, how about just walk to the Neon and then drive it over here? Would it be better to make the gold transfer in this motel lot or somewhere nearby? No, too risky. It would just be my luck for Susan to look out, or go out, and notice that the car is gone. She'd then call the cops and report it stolen. Game over, Mark. You lose. A recon run, though, in the Focus is a good idea. It'll pass some time. I've got to do something. I'm going nuts just waiting here.*

Mark got into the white Ford Focus and tootled over to Carolina Beach Avenue. The LED clock on the dashboard read 11:16. *Interesting, the numerals 4, 5 and 6 are the only ones which have the same number of LED segments as their face value. I wonder if anyone else has ever noticed that. Why do I notice such trivial, non-revenue-generating things? Well, it can soon be my already-paid-for hobby.*

He noticed an equal assortment of adults and teenagers out on the sandy sidewalks. Hordes of buzzed 20-somethings were staggering in the street. As he headed north, the throngs thinned out.

He pulled up alongside their blue sedan. It was still in the exact same spot next to the sidewalk. It looked like Susan hadn't driven it since he last saw it. He thought about opening the trunk and taking a peek, but his saner track of thinking won out.

Mark looked up and noticed that all of the lights were off in room 120. It looked like a vacant room. *Was Susan already asleep? Or, was she out partying somewhere on the island? Should I switch cars? No, don't be foolish. Stick to the plan.* He quietly drove away.

When he reached the North Pier, he found a vacant spot in the sand lot. He parked the Focus and cut the engine off. He sat in the car for a few minutes, just thinking if it was safe to walk out on the pier. *Well, Susan's car is back at the motel. This pier is a mile and a half from her motel room. Susan would never walk this far alone at night. Yeah, it's ok to venture out.*

Mark got out of his white sedan and walked up to the pier's entrance, which was actually a switch-backing series of ramps that led up to a basic American-fare greasy spoon. He passed through the eatery with his head down. Most of the dozen-or-so people were teenagers playing video games. *So far, so good.* He walked out the door and was on the pier.

It was a totally different scene outside. The ocean wind was blowing salty air across the pier from left to right, north to south. There was a lot of chatter amongst the older folks. Every time someone landed a fish, heads turned. These

amateur fishermen were getting their money's worth. As he walked out the 700-foot-long, wood-planked pier, he saw what they had been catching: spot, shark, eel, mackerel, flounder, croaker, shad, crabs, some jellyfish and even a fairly large squid. *Gosh, the sea has so many strange creatures in it. I'm glad that I don't swim in it anymore.*

He continued to the very end of the pier and walked back about twenty feet, and parked himself in a vacant wooden bench made of 2 x 8s. He looked far down the beach and saw a multitude of street lights and blue-lit windows. *Somewhere down there, Susan, my ex-wife-to-be, is sleeping in her motel room.* Actually at that moment, Susan was about ready to leave The Sea Twitch Restaurant with the bass player.

Mark started to focus on the sea swells as they passed by the pilings. The lights under the pier's planking created an optical illusion: When one looked down in certain areas, it looked like you were seeing the ocean's sandy bottom. *Was it really only four feet deep this far out? No, it has to be deeper than that.* It was.

A ship's light several miles out to sea caught Mark's eye. He remembered that many shipwrecks had occurred off the North Carolina coast over the years. *The Graveyard of the Atlantic*, they called it. *Wonder how much gold went down with those sailing ships. I bet most of it is still down there in assorted octopus gardens. Well, my gold is on dry land. In a dry trunk.*

He looked at his watch; it read: 1:11. A pair of seagulls were circling and screeching overhead. They eventually alighted on

the pier and began to have bird sex. *Sex is going on everywhere. Damn, I've got over two hours to kill. Maybe I should just do it now. Being out in a motel parking lot at 3:30 AM will just look suspicious ... very suspicious to a passing cop.*

A sudden gust of wind almost lifted him off his seat. *Maybe that's a sign. Maybe I should just go and get it over with now. Get those sexy gold crescents in the right trunk – in my trunk – in my possession!*

He got up and began to walk back down the pier towards the beach. He passed through the restaurant and on to his rental car. He unlocked it and sat down in the driver's seat. *What a situation. Must stay mentally sharp. Don't assume anything, Mark. Mind, don't go dense on me tonight. Not tonight.*

He looked back at the car's rear seat. It was totally free of all objects. Nothing but a clean bench seat. *I need a special piece of luggage for the gold. A hard-shell suitcase, or maybe a matching set. I've got it: I'll drive to the 24-hour Super Wally World at Monkey Junction. Yeah, that's it! That will pass some time, too. And calm the nerves.*

As he passed by the Dauphin Reign Motel, he noticed a light on in Room 120. *She's probably screwing some guy from one of these bars.* Mark would never know that his thinking was right on the money – as good as gold.

Chapter 9

Back in the Charlotte area at the exact same time, in the town of Mint Hill, Travis's big bonfire party in Fred's memory was nearing its conclusion. Loud rock music by Frank Zappa was still playing and everyone was now polluted drunk, as three kegs of beer had been drained by over eighty revelers in a cornfield off Brief Road. The scent of burning weed popped up here and there.

Despite Travis's pleading for everyone to just sleep on the five-acre property on this mild and clear night, some partiers decided that they needed to go elsewhere. Some wanted more beer and wanted to beat the 2:00 AM cut-off. Most just wanted to sleep in their own beds. However, most cars did not have anything close to a sober designated driver.

Their vehicles – even the four-wheel-drive ones – were getting stuck in the deep muck as they tried to drive away. Travis had set up the parking so that you entered one way – at the high side of the parcel of land – and exited at another side of the field – the low side. The exit side was a swamp from the recent heavy rains. It was a drunk driver trap, and it was proving to be very effective.

Drunken merrymakers were pushing on the backs of mud-stuck vehicles and falling down. One after another. It was becoming quite a comedy on the slippery red clay.

Then this one pissed-off throttle-head floored it and charged the bonfire. Several people were struck by his souped-up maroon-red Chevy Chevelle. Legs were run over and broken.

The screaming could be heard over the hundred-decibel recorded music.

The 1968 Chevelle came to rest on the red-hot fire pit. The gas tank was right atop the hot coals. As soon as a few not-totally-obiterated partiers figured out what might be getting ready to happen – it did happen: BOOM!

The Chevelle's fuel tank exploded. Flames shot thirty-five feet into the night sky. Pieces of the car were sent airborne, some landing up to three hundred feet away.

Six people died from the initial explosion, including the crazed driver. Travis and his wife Nancy escaped harm, as they were manning the stereo system at the time. Fourteen more were hospitalized. It was all over the Charlotte news the next morning. The online news aggregators picked it up, too.

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At a split-level home adjacent to the cornfield, a ten-year-old boy was in his room doing some research on the former Vikings kicker, Fred Cox. His dad had told him that the famous Minnesota purple people eaters' placekicker had missed back-to-back extra points on his birthday in a game in the mid-70s. He told him that he was sure of it, as he remembered watching that game on TV. The ten-year-old thought his dad was going daft.

The young lad scanned NFL game-summary boxes from the 1974 through 1976 seasons on his tablet computer. He noticed that Fred Cox missed back-to-back extra points in Miami on his thirty-eighth birthday: December 11, 1976. That's when the Chevelle's gas tank explosion caused his

green Nerf football to roll off the overhead hutch shelf and bonk him on the head.

There was no harm or injury. However, he couldn't believe his dad's memory was still that accurate.

Chapter 10

Mark arrived at the Super Wally World at the junction of US 421 and NC 132 at 1:42 AM. This intersection was known as *Monkey Junction* by the locals, as there was a small private zoo with monkeys just down the highway. *Maybe all of the monkeys are asleep dreaming of gold, or dreaming of golden monkeys.*

Once inside the brightly lit store, Mark meandered over to the luggage section. He decided to go with two pieces of luggage: a burgundy-red matching set. *If I have two pieces of luggage, I can use the larger one for my clothes and the smaller one for the two gold crescents. It should be an easy transfer into this suitcase. Time is of the essence. And presence is to be minimized.*

He checked the handles of the smaller suitcase to see if it could handle the weight. They seemed sturdy enough. He proceeded to the checkout line.

At the cash register, the young, black, female cashier told Mark that he had a cool exotic look. Mark was surprised by the comment at first, almost taken aback. He hadn't really cared about how he appeared to females since he found that gold on the west bank of Little Meadow Creek.

"My dad's side is Dutch; my mom is half Vietnamese and half Malaysian," Mark dryly announced.

"Looks like they got the proportions right." She was overtly flirting with him. There was no one else in his line.

“Thanks for the compliment. You look very well-proportioned, too. Well, listen, I have to run. I’m on a secret mission.” Mark then chuckled.

“What’s your alias, secret agent?” *Alias?*

“Oh, I’m Mark. No need for an alias yet. Nice to meet you. And, what might your alias be?” *Can he not see my name tag? Is he afraid to look at my left boob?*

“My code name is Chantelle,” she said while nodding down and eyeing her name tag. *Wow, she is sexy as hell. She’s looks like fun. But, I can’t get distracted by a pretty woman right now. / I seem to have his attention now.*

“Well, I’d love to continue this chat, Chantelle – I really would – but upcoming events have my name on them.” Mark couldn’t believe what he had just said. *Get a grip, and get out of this store. Stop talking! Good grief, what’s wrong with you?*

“Goodnight, my secret agent.” She winked to him as he exited the store. *Do people know that I’m soon to be gold-laden? Do I have that minutes-away-from-wealth swagger?* His thoughts made him chuckle. *Don’t get cocky, sport. Remember, you don’t have anything yet. / I wonder what he’s up to.*

As he walked back to his rental car, he thought about what he told Chantelle at the register. *Why did I have to say that I was on a secret mission? That was dumb. Even if I was only joking,*

not a smart move. No more idle conversation with anyone. No more allusive remarks. Just keep your mouth shut.

When Mark arrived at his rental car with his shopping cart, he was puzzled. He thought about the upcoming trunk transfer. He looked up and noticed that the nearest parking lot light's plastic cover was missing. *Where should I put this luggage? On the rear seat? In the trunk? Which place will have quicker access? Which place will look less suspicious?*

After mulling it over for eight seconds, he decided on the rear seat. Once inside the car with the luggage, he cut the price tags off with a jagged house key. *That Chantelle sure is hot. Should I go back in the store and buy a cold drink just so I can get her phone number? No, just get going – get the hell out of here. Stick to the plan.*

He started the Ford Focus and got back on US 421 South. The white sand on the shoulder of the highway almost looked magical. He looked deeper into the pine forest. It looked like a scene from another planet. *Is it all just a play within a play? And, can I just make some hay?*

At 2:22, he was crossing back over the Snow's Cut Bridge. A thin crescent moon was out, disappearing and re-emerging from behind the high cirrus clouds. *Good, I won't be doing this under a full moon. The less light, the better.*

He waited at the red traffic light at Carl Winner Drive. A Carolina Beach Police cruiser was beside him, on his left. He just tried to look preoccupied, fumbling with the radio knobs.

He was afraid to look over at the police officer. *Why do I always get so damn paranoid around cops? I've done nothing wrong. I don't have any dope or alcohol on me. I'm not inebriated. This rental car's lights work and it has a valid tag. And, there's no gold in this car ... well, not yet.*

After what seemed to be half an eternity, the traffic light changed to green and the police car sped away. *Whew! If a person could get arrested for just being paranoid, I'd already be looking through iron bars. I've got to relax a little. Just calm down, Mark. Chill the fuck out.*

Chapter 11

Greg and Susan were sloshed. They sloshed around on the bed, fumbling for each other's joy spots. Greg sloshed out his limp sausage. Unlike the inebriated lunch treat known as Rick, Greg's salami never got totally hard; it was forged in rubber. But, thankfully, he wore one.

His poor cocksmanhood was more like something to endure than enjoy. He took forever to get aroused, and to be truthful, Susan never did. Greg finally had an orgasm, signaled by a loud burp, rapturous fart, and spooging of Susan's left thigh.

The drunken sex was more of a banal blur than an erogenously exciting erotic escapade for Susan. There were no spine-tingling rushes. No anticipatory suspense. No passion. Nothing. She was glad when it was over. She wished that the Hawaiian ukulele player would have balled her, instead.

The ancient wall-inset air conditioner rattled away. Soon Greg was snoring like a two-man saw. The crickets opted for another window sill. Susan passed-out six minutes later at 1:44. The bathroom sink faucet dripped at a rate of two drops per minute as the muted TV flickered out various colors on the walls all night.

Neither had a dream they could remember in the morning. Their hangovers were real stingers. Moreover, it was a very-short-chapter one-nighter that Susan would soon forget.

Chapter 12

Mark rolled up next to their Dodge Neon at 2:28 AM. The streets in that area were now deserted. Only a dim, flashing glow could be seen on the window blinds of room 120. *Susan is probably passed-out again with the TV on. Well, this is late enough. It's showtime, Mark. Let's do this – do it right.*

Without further pondering, Mark leapt out of the Ford Focus and quickly walked to the other side, opening the passenger-side rear door. Then he opened the trunk of their Dodge Neon. He looked inside, way up inside the trunk. *Thank God! Yes, it's still here. Whew!*

He grabbed the tent and pulled it down. It slid towards the rear of the car. *That's right, come to papa.* Then as he lifted the tent, the gold fillets fell out on the trunk's black carpet. *Ah, yes! There's my golden couple. Wow, what sexy curved objects they are. Oh, how I've missed you, my lovely objects of supreme desire.*

Mark then walked back to the rental car and grabbed the smaller suitcase. He placed it in the Neon's trunk, off to the left side. He then filled the smaller suitcase with the two slender, C-shaped pieces of gold. He looked around, trying not to look any more suspicious. *Well, no problems so far.*

The larger semicircular gold nugget barely fit. He placed the gold-filled suitcase in the back seat of the Ford Focus, next to the empty larger suitcase and closed the door. *Finally, it's in my car. At last, Allah, it's in my possession. I've got it back! Yey!*

He then quietly closed the trunk of the blue Dodge Neon and walked over to his white rental car. *I'll transfer these suitcases to the trunk somewhere else. Maybe do it at the Mount Bourbon Inn tomorrow morning in broad daylight, after I put my clothes in the larger one. Yeah, that's it; that's the plan.*

Mark cautiously closed the rear door and trotted around the car. He jumped in, started the engine, and eased down Carolina Beach Avenue. He never looked back. *Nirvana is my next stop, sweetheart! One way. Express.*

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He was only going 28 MPH in the 25 MPH zone on Canal Drive when the traffic signal at Harper Avenue suddenly turned yellow. And then, it suddenly turned red. *What an ungodly short yellow light! This must be a rigged ticket stop.*

He jammed on the brakes and nearly skidded into the intersection. He knew at this time of night the cops were out in force, looking for drunks. *I absolutely cannot be pulled over. No way. No how. It can't happen. Period. I can't run a red light!*

As the car came to a complete stop, he heard a ripping sound and then a thump. The smaller gold nugget in the smaller suitcase had suddenly lurched forward as he braked and tore through the fabric area at the top; it was protruding through the suitcase. *You're kidding me! This is not happening! C'mon, gimme a freakin' break!*

Mark continued to his motel room with no more problems. He parked the car and pushed the gold nugget back into the smaller suitcase. Now the gold was no longer visible.

However, the ripped hole was obvious to anyone who studied the suitcase.

He locked the car, re-checked that he had locked all the doors, and re-checked one more time. He glanced at the car one last time and walked towards his room. The crescent moon was now unobscured. *They say that it's damn cold on that moon. Oxygen-starved. Cratered to hell. Probably gold-less, too.*

Once inside he went to the fridge and grabbed a cold Guinness. *Ah, the taste of victory. All things considered, you've done well, my boy. Mission very well accomplished.*

He was almost giddy. The wall clock said 2:43. *What a night! What a successful night. I won! Ha-ha! I won, suckers! Markie-boy has scored a golden sack trick!*

He switched the old tube-style TV back on, and hypnotically flipped through the channels, riding waves of endorphin-released euphoria. Adrenaline was still being secreted. He was still victoriously jacked-up.

His surfing stopped at TCM, Turner Classic Movies. *No movie-interrupting commercials on this channel. Perfect.*

An old black-and-white movie was running. It looked like a film noir. He leaned back in the chair as he sipped the thick, dark, Irish stout. *Maybe they're having a film noir marathon. I love this genre. I feel like I'm in one of these movies right now.*

The movie was *Detour*, and it was the last twenty-three minutes of the 1945 Edgar G. Ulmer classic. *Gosh, it's Detour! Man, I wish I would've caught this from the beginning. But then, maybe I would've ended up like that poor schlep Al. So*

ironic that this movie is on right now, on this particular night, saturated with suspense.

The movie's setting was now Los Angeles. Vera, the femme fatale, was now blackmailing Al, the piano player. They get into a heated argument. Somehow Vera dies. The phone cord was wrapped around her neck. Al didn't realize it. *What bad luck this guy has.* He's now hitchhiking again. And here come the cops. The End.

It was now 3:08. He heard a gust of wind blow an empty beer can over, outside in the parking lot. *Well, thankfully, no one is blackmailing me. My 'Vera' is totally clueless. And, I haven't killed anyone, intentionally or by accident. I've really done nothing wrong. I can rest easy. I removed found gold – gold that no one even knew about – from my/our own car and put into another legally rented car. No offense there. I didn't steal it; it doesn't belong to anyone. Well, I guess that landowner owns the gold, but he never even knew he had it. So, he's certainly not missing it now. There's certainly no warrant out for my arrest. Or, is there? Of course not! Let's cease with this irrational paranoia right now.*

Chapter 13

Two small skiffs were tied onto the northern Snow's Cut wooden bridge-pier protector to stay stationary, while a wily pair of fishermen fished and wished away the night. The angling duo preferred this mooring method, as the current could be fairly strong during the tide changes; it could drag a mushroom anchor, and even a hinged-anvil type could become a sand-hopping plow.

However, this was a great place to sit, chill out, and catch fish. The variety of species was surprising in this man-made, river-to-sound channel between fresh and saltwater; intracoastally between Maine and Florida.

"Catch anything in the last hour?" A bearded Caucasian man on boat one asked a beach-hatted white guy on boat two.

"Hooked a nice flounder ten minutes ago. Where have you been, Ed?"

"I've been drinking beer, Walt. Taking care of im-po-tant business."

"Yeah, I hear ya. Hey, you better sit back down; you may fall off your boat. I don't want to call in a possible drowning."

"I could swim the inlet right now, Walt. No problem. No problem, at all. Bring it on. I could swim to China."

"Wrong ocean, Ed."

"Ok, Morocco! I could be in Casablanca by noon."

"How about I just take your word for it."

They both were chuckling. Lines were reeled in and recast. They then went into a period of fisherman's silence, when no words needed to be said. They both recalled fishing in the same spot one July night ten years ago.

Above them, vehicles passed to and fro over the Snow's Cut Bridge. There were fewer and fewer vehicles as the night wore on, under such a thin crescent moon, which was viewable through the bridge's railing, high above.

A lone seagull squawked, then flew away from the power line overhead. Below the surface, the fish seemed to be getting smarter; the fishermen stopped getting bites. They were about ready to call it a night.

Chapter 14

As Mark reached for the large remote control to channel surf, he heard the distinctive chirp from his cell phone. A text message had been received. It was from Susan. She had sent it earlier in the day, but his sucky cell phone had just now got it; it tersely read:

Relaxing at the beach.
Back on Sunday.

He almost expelled a mouthful of beer. *What a lying whore! She's something else. What a piece of work she's become. God, she repulses me! Well, at least she is oblivious to my whereabouts. She obviously doesn't know I'm down here. Yey! She can blow every pipe on the beach. I'll keep the gold. I call that a bargain. The best I ever had.*

He continued to flip through the channel lineup, but didn't see anything that he liked. *How can so many channels have nothing on them that interests me? Am I that atypical now? Have I always been? I'll just be another anomalous rich dude with an inner golden glow. Ha-ha.*

All Mark really wanted to do is get a goodnight's rest for the drive back to Charlotte later that morning. He thought another movie would get him drowsy. He was still quite cranked; the adrenaline had stopped being secreted, but it was still making its rounds in his system, along with the caffeine.

Mark remembered that he had some SleepPhast tablets. He popped two out of the blister wrap and threw them in his

mouth. He chased them down with the last slug of his Guinness Extra Stout beer.

Mark could feel sleep grabbing him twenty minutes later. He turned the unwatched TV off. Then he took his shoes off and laid his tired body down on the bed's comforter, making sure not to let his hands touch it, as he had seen the reports about filthy motel comforters. *Fecal bacteria media.*

He turned off the nightstand light and quickly passed out in his clothes.

At 4:44 AM his twilight sleep was interrupted by a nightmare which blended into his real-life surroundings. In the bad dream, he felt that someone – or some evil entity – was in the motel room, lurking in the shadows. When he awoke, it was like a continuation of the bad dream. *Where is this person or thing? Who is he or she ... or it? Do they know that I have over a million dollars in gold in my rental car's trunk? Darn, I think they do!*

He was getting very agitated and paranoid. He really thought that someone was somewhere in his motel room, hiding, waiting for the right moment to strike like a cobra. He couldn't sit down; he was pacing about like a madman. *Where is that fucker hiding?* "Show yourself, you freakin' coward!" he screamed across the bed.

He checked the two closets. Nothing. He went to the bathroom. Nothing. He even checked under the bed. Nothing ... but an old receipt from Waxway for tampons and condoms.

What an odd purchase. He checked again. And again. He was certifiably flipping out.

It got so bad that he was on the phone – talking with no one. Only he thought it was the villain – the one who wanted his gold. Mark was now lost in a netherworld, becoming fully immersed in a cruel and merciless unreality.

“I’m sorry,” he said to the dial tone on the handset. “I don’t have any gold. None. You must have me mistaken with someone else – that other person who has the gold. I don’t know where he or she is at the moment. In fact, I won’t ever know who he or she is in all likelihood. So, I can’t help you with that. Now, if you don’t mind, it’s very late, and I must be getting some sleep. Goodbye!”

Mark slammed his cell phone down on the table and ran out the door. He opened the rear passenger-side door of the Ford Focus and grabbed the smaller suitcase. He opened the trunk and began to remove the spare tire. *C’m on, let’s go.*

Once it was removed, he carefully laid the two golden C-sections under the spare tire’s recessed resting spot. He positioned the golden boomerangs so that they couldn’t be seen unless you removed the spare tire. They fit perfectly under there; they almost formed a circle, nearly matching the circumference of the spare tire’s rim.

Mark’s perception of reality was all askew now. *I must hurry. I must hurry. It’s after me. It’s gonna get me, if I don’t hurry. I’ve got to move faster. I’ve got to get the hell out of here! Why is*

everything taking so goddam long? Why are the soles of my shoes coated with contact cement? Why can't my body move faster? What is slowing me down? Have they already drugged me? How did they do it? How?! He was losing it. He was gone.

He quickly replaced the spare tire, tightening the wing nut so that the golden fillets could not move from vibration or from starting and stopping. It was very snug. *That gold won't slide a single millimeter. It's immobilized and completely hidden. That gold-hungry phantom won't find it if he/she/it looks here. I'm going to win this golden battle, you lousy freaking thief! This gold is mine!* "I've paid the price for it in humiliation, goddamit!" He was thinking aloud now.

He then put the black plastic piece and carpet section back over the spare tire. He looked around. *Where is that evil bastard? Where'd he/she/it go?* Poor Mark was in full flip-out mode.

Mark closed the trunk and snapped his head around again. No one. *Good, it didn't see me. The coast appears to be clear. I've got to roll now. I've got to get the hell out of here now! I've already wasted too much damn time here.*

Mark then jumped into the rental car, started the engine and bolted down Harper Avenue to the traffic light. It was red. *C'mon, you motherless whore, change! Change to green now! Do it! Let's go!*

After waiting what seemed to be a third of an eternity, the light turned green. *Halle-fucking-luyah! There is a god after all.* He checked his turn signal; it was on.

He made a left turn onto Lake Park Boulevard with his head halfway out the window. In fact, he had opened all four windows so that he could hear the sounds better outside the car. He needed to know if the person or thing was sneaking up on him. He was so delusional that he believed the entity stalking him could fly through the air ... and stop on a dime.

It was getting worse with every red traffic light. He looked in the rear-view mirror, there he/she/it was! The shadowy personage was right behind him. *Brother mucker! Let's go! Go faster! Let's get the fuck off this goddam island!*

Mark didn't even wait for the red light at Lewis Drive to turn green. He was the only car at the stoplight at 4:57 AM. He depressed the accelerator pedal all the way down in an attempt to shake the person or thing that was tailing him. *See ya later, alligator! You aint getting my gold. Game over. You lose, pal. I leave with the gold; you go back to wherever you came from empty-handed. You picked the wrong tourist, douchebag!*

He shot through the red light and sped up the southern inclined approach to the Snow's Cut Bridge. It sounded like the Ford Focus engine was going to blow up as he revved up the bridge. *You can't get me. You can't take my gold! You can't have it! It's mine – only mine! And now I bid you adieu, you horseless prick!*

When he got to the apex of the bridge, the Ford Focus was going 82 MPH. He was pressed to the back of his seat. For a fleeting moment, he focused on a blue star in the early morning sky. *Is that Venus? Wait, maybe it's the mother ship. Oh, my God – it is! They're here!*

Just after crossing the crown of the humpback bridge, he thought he saw the phantom on the double yellow line. He drove the white Ford Focus right at him/her/it at full throttle. The car went right through whatever he thought it was. *Wow, it can disappear at will. How can I win against that? It has superhuman powers. I'm doomed. It's over.*

Then he tried to get back on the right side of the road. However, Mark turned the steering wheel too hard to the right for the high speed at which he was going. His overcorrection caused the little four-door sedan to skid out of control. It crashed into the low concrete railing on the left side of the bridge.

Luckily, there was no oncoming traffic at that moment. In fact, there were no other cars on the bridge when Mark crashed the Ford Focus into the southbound concrete railing.

After the violent impact, the little Ford Focus flipped over the railing, hurtling sixty-five feet down to the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway.

Splloosh! A passing ray paid the ultimate price.

Chapter 15

The two fishermen were untying their skiffs, preparing to leave, when a white sedan dove from the top of the Snow's Cut Bridge. The smaller skiff was almost struck in the aft by the falling Ford Focus; the other one nearly capsized by the ensuing splash wake. The two fishermen couldn't believe what they had just witnessed. *Holy shit! / Did I just see what I thought I saw?*

"Holy cow!" the youngest one in the beach hat screamed.

"I've seen everything now," the older, bearded one said.

"What should we do now?" The younger fisherman's face had a look of pure shock.

"Well, we can't dive down there. We don't have any lights. The water is pitch-dark."

The older one called 911. A New Hanover County Water Rescue boat arrived fourteen minutes later. A Coast Guard vessel was just behind them. The boats huddled together. Information about what was observed was shared.

The white Ford Focus had sunk thirteen feet to the sandy channel's bottom, coming to rest on its four tires in only fifty-four seconds. A large eel peered in the window, not sure whether to proceed or back up and flee.

A pair of divers with underwater lights dropped below the surface. They found and extricated Mark's body. He was

obviously dead. His skull was cracked. Severely cracked. Some of Mark's gray matter was hanging out, quickly becoming grouper snack.

Mark had died on impact with the concrete bridge railing. Blunt head trauma. His seat belt was still fastened. The thirty-eight pounds of golden fillets were still secured under the spare tire in the trunk.

The Coast Guard placed buoys above the sunken car as it was still too dark to float the car to the surface. Also, they didn't want any deep-draw vessel to hit the car. Mark's car had reduced the channel depth to eight feet on the north side of the dredged trench. Quite a few of the vessels that used the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway drew over eight feet. The Coast Guard didn't want this accident compounded.

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At 8:32 AM the smashed 2011 white Ford Focus was up on a barge. It was transported eleven miles up the Cape Fear River to the Port of Wilmington, where it was unloaded into a secure fenced area.

A routine examination of the destroyed front end was performed. The car was a total loss. The trunk was opened and a cursory inspection was performed, but the spare tire was never removed.

Exceptional Rent-A-Car in Charlotte was then contacted. The rep then called a corporate higher-up to decide what to do with

the totaled automobile. Twenty-four hours later they had a plan for disposition.

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The cause of Mark's death was later listed as alcohol-related even though he only had .03% alcohol in his bloodstream when tested, way below the legal limit of .08%. It just became another motor vehicle death to be recorded with a check mark in the box after the question: *Was alcohol involved in the fatality?*

They never tested for the active ingredients in the SleepPhast product. Fred had warned Mark over a year ago not to drink on it. Mark learned why the hard way.

Chapter 16

Greg got up first at 7:35 AM, scratched his stubble then his balls, mumbled something about needing to go, gathered his things, and was out the door and gone in five minutes. A classic rock-n-roller one-night stand.

Susan caught a glimpse of his disheveled mullet as he closed the door. *Gosh, I feel like a too-old-for-this, pathetic, grade-C groupie. What am I doing? What have I become?*

Susan's head hurt from all of the Zombie drinks last night. She could deal with the hangover; she had her oxies and she had nowhere to be. She was just glad that Greg ejaculated on her leg. However, from now on, 'No glove, no love' would be her motto. In fact, she was going to buy a pack of condoms as soon as she saw a pharmacy.

Susan slid over to the refrigerator and got a bottled water. She gulped down some St. Joseph's aspirin. She swore by it for hangover relief. She lay back down on the ruffled bed. *What a day this is going to be. Beach world, please stay quiet.*

After an hour of just lying on the bed, semi-watching some lame teenage-girl drama, she got up to take a shower. She stayed in there for twenty-five minutes – until all of the hot water was gone. *Is that it? No more hot water? Well, I guess for this bargain rate, it's to be expected.*

She toweled off while thinking about Mark. *How should I ask for the divorce? Or, should I lure him into asking for it by*

pissing him off? I'm sure he'd bite. Wonder what he's doing right now in Charlotte?

Then her cell phone rang. *Is that Mark?* She tapped Answer.

"Hello, am I speaking with Mrs. Susan van Buren?" the official-sounding older male voice asked. *Oh, crap, who in the world is this?*

"Yes, that's me; and, who is this?" Susan timidly asked.

"This is Chief Wurroll with the Carolina Beach Police Department." *Oh, no!*

Her heart almost missed a beat. "Yes —"

"Ma'am, I'm very sorry; I don't have good news. Your husband has died." *No way! Did I really hear this?*

She screamed, "What?!" She took a breath. "Are you sure it's my husband?" *Was Mark really down here at Carolina Beach? What the hell!*

"Yes, we are very certain. Where are you right now?" *This can't be happening!*

"I'm at the Dauphin Reign Motel. Oh, my God!" Susan started to cry like a little girl.

"We'll need for you to come by our station at 1121 North Lake Boulevard, which is US 421. Do you think you can find it? If not we can have a patrol car pick you up."

"No, that's ok. I know the road. I'll be right over. Just give me fifteen minutes to recompose myself."

"That's not a problem, Mrs. van Buren. I'll be waiting here for you. Just ask for me."

"Ok," she whispered.

Susan sat on the end of the bed with her head in her hands. She was sobbing. The grief was overwhelming. She felt guilty and dirty. She slowly got herself dressed and made her way over to the town's new police station.

Her mind couldn't stop swirling with questions. *How did he die? Did someone kill him? Was it an accident? Did he overdose on some drugs? Did Mark commit suicide? Did he know which motel she was in? Did he know about the extramarital affairs? Did he confront Rick? Did Rick kill him? Did he confront Greg? Did Greg kill him? Where was he staying? When did he arrive at the beach? Had he been spying on her the whole time?* Her mind was a million thoughts per minute.

Chapter 17

Chief Edward Wurroll was a large, rotund, balding, white man in his late 50s who had seen plenty of shenanigans in his thirty-two-year law enforcement career at Carolina Beach. He had climbed through the small department's ranks, avoiding the political pitfalls that sank others. He always knew how to play the current mayor to his advantage.

He had started out as a foot cop in the summer of 1980, working the then-much-seedier boardwalk area, a six-block zone dominated by honky-tonk bars that featured both kinds of music: country and country rock. And featured fights with both kinds of weapons: pistols and broken beer bottles.

He once got slashed on the side of his face by a broken Miller High Life beer bottle while trying to break up a saloon fight in the boardwalk area in the mid-70s. The U-shaped scar was very obvious below his left eye. It was hard to stop noticing. He had got used to the stares and long gazes.

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Susan pulled into the Carolina Beach Municipal Office Facility at 9:55 AM. She got out of the blue Dodge Neon somewhat unsteadily and walked over to the glass and metal door and pulled it open. There was an older, white, female receptionist, maybe about sixty-five years old, sitting inside. She glanced up at Susan as she entered the atrium.

"I'm here to talk with Chief Wurroll," Susan stuttered as she whimpered.

"Right this way, ma'am," the receptionist informed as she led her down a central hallway, turning left at the end.

The chief's door was partially open. The receptionist spoke through the crack. "Susan van Buren is here, sir."

"Ok, very good. Send her in."

Susan entered the relatively new, yet fairly spartan, office. "Hello, sir," she mouthed with hardly any force.

"I'm truly sorry, Mrs. van Buren. No matter how old I get, this never gets any easier. May I call you Susan?"

"Yes, that's fine." *You can call me anything.*

"Susan, you can see Mark's body after we talk. His corpse is at the Medical Center's morgue in Wilmington." *Corpse? Gosh, this real. Mark's dead. He's gone.*

"Thank you, sir." Susan looked at the lone framed photo of the chief and his family of four. Two all-American sons and a devoted-looking wife: a portrait of pride.

"Susan, Mark was found in a rental car that went off the Snow's Cut Bridge early this morning. The car sank in the waterway. Did you two come down here together?" *He went off that tall bridge? What in the world!*

"Uh, no, we didn't, sir." *Does he really think that I had a hand in Mark's death? Am I a suspect in some kind of heinous crime? Did Mark get involved in a drug deal that went bad? Was his car forced off the bridge?*

"Were you two staying together at the Dauphin Reign Motel?"
The chief raised his eyebrows.

"No, we weren't, sir. We were estranged. Our marriage was on the rocks as they say. I didn't even know my husband was down here. Maybe he was following me out of curiosity." She felt almost proud of her forthrightness.

"You can relax, Susan. I know you're telling the truth. What you have told me checks out. You are not a suspect – just a person of interest as we say in the law enforcement field."
Thank God!

The chief leaned to his left side and scratched his lower back with his scarred right hand. *I wonder what happened to his hand. It looks like he submerged it in a fryer vat.*

Then he sat up straight and continued. "This is a small town on a relatively small island. We already know that Mark had checked into another motel. Just a few more questions and we'll be done. I know this is hard."

"Sure. No problem, sir." *So far, so good.*

"Did you ever see Mark down here, even for just a glance?"
The chief looked very interested in her answer.

“No, I swear that I never saw him down here – anywhere,” Susan stated emphatically. “I was very surprised to learn that he was at Carolina Beach, sir.”

Chief Wurroll then placed Mark’s cell phone on his desk. “Do you recognize this cell phone?”

“Yes, I do; it’s Mark’s.” *Thank God I didn’t send him any hateful, four-letter-laced texts. Well, not recently.*

“Susan, we found Mark’s cell phone in the motel where he was staying from Friday evening to early Saturday morning, just prior to his accident on the bridge. It was slightly damaged, but our IT whiz was able to restore most of its functionality. I’m going to play for you a short audio recording that was stored on it.” *Oh no, what could this be?*

The chief then pressed a series of buttons on Mark’s cell phone. The audio file was about two minutes of her and Rick having sex on Friday afternoon, but the chief only played about ten seconds of it.

Susan blushed. She was shocked. She turned her head down in shame. *How in the world did Mark get in my motel room and record this? How in the world did he get under the bed without me or Rick noticing? What was he up to?*

“Sir, I feel totally humiliated and devastated. I met Rick on the beach. It was just a casual hookup to boost my self-esteem. I had never done this before. Really. I thought it would be

harmless fun. Rick said that he thought I was sexy. I hadn't heard that for a very long time. I wasn't feeling good about myself. My marriage was failing. Mark didn't love me anymore. It felt good to be desired after being ignored for so long. I never knew Mark was in the motel room, I swear. I'm not that kinky. I would never knowingly have sex with another man and let my husband record the sounds. Never."

"Listen, it's ok. Your sex life is not our business. I just want to ask you: Why do you think Mark was in your motel room? Do you think he recorded you two for a future divorce-court proceeding?"

"All of this is so shocking to me, sir. Mark's death. Mark secretly being in my motel room recording me. I guess that is what he planned on using that recording for. I don't have any other ideas on why he would do that. I'm really just blown away by all of this, sir. I admit that I wanted a divorce from Mark, but I most certainly didn't want him to die. I swear I didn't. This all hurts so much." *Gee, I hope there aren't any more humiliating tidbits on Mark's cell phone. Does he have video on it, too? Dear God, I hope not.*

The chief digested what Susan served up and resumed the questioning. "Had Mark double-crossed anyone recently? Say, a bad business dealing? Did he owe anyone money?" *Form questions.*

"No, sir. No one that I know of."

"Did you have anything that was his?"

Susan thought for a few seconds. "Well, we share the car. We had two cars, but when money got tight, we got rid of one of them." *It wasn't really our choice, but he won't know that.*

"I see."

"Maybe my husband wanted the keys to the Neon. But, didn't you say that he crashed in a rental car?"

"I did," the chief restated.

"I really am puzzled as to why he was under the bed in my motel room. I just don't get it. Mark wasn't that weird." *What a lie; he was actually weird as hell.*

"I hear you, Susan. Another question: Did he use any illicit and/or prescription drugs?" *He's just going down the form to complete the interview.*

"No, sir. None that I am aware of." *Thank God he didn't ask that question about me. I would've choked.*

"We've looked up Mark's parents and found out that they are both deceased. Does he have any siblings that should be contacted?"

"No, sir. Mark was an only child. His grandparents on both sides died long ago. He has an uncle in California and an aunt in Colorado. I'll contact them."

“That would be great. Ok, Mrs. van Buren, I think we’re done for now. Thanks for your answers. I’m so sorry about all of this. Our receptionist will give you more information about Mark’s body. Thanks for coming down here so promptly. I’ll contact you if we need anything else.” *Please don’t.*

Susan walked out of the chief’s office very somberly. She got a blue envelope from the receptionist, which contained information about where Mark’s corpse was being stored and when she could see it. She wasn’t interested.

She got in the Dodge Neon and slowly drove back to the Dauphin Reign Motel.

The sights, scents and sounds were pure American-summer beach. The contrast was so great: so many tourists enjoying their vacation right next to the most distraught woman on Earth.

She went in the motel office and extended her stay by one more night. She told the desk clerk: “I’ve loved it so much here that I want to stay for the whole weekend.” *What a liar I can still be* was the thought that echoed in her mind.

Chapter 18

Gerald Zowen was a no-nonsense, now-quite-jaded, Caucasian junkyard man in his late 50s with light-brown-to-light-ash-gray, collar-length hair. He was the owner of Shipyard Boulevard Auto Salvage. It had been his business for the past thirty-one years. He had won it as a result of a winning poker hand – a jack-high spade straight flush – at the old Barbary Coast tavern in downtown Wilmington.

He had two German Shepherds on his lot. One stayed near him; the other was a roamer. Scout, he called the latter. Jenny was his office guard dog. Eight other German Shepherds had passed away over the years. Gerald loved that breed. He had pictures of them on the dark lauan paneling in his office.

Gerald had received the initial call from Exceptional Rent-A-Car's uptown Charlotte office around 9:30 AM on that foggy Sunday morning of June 24th. He happened to be in the office updating his online parts inventory, when some guy in Shallotte inquired via e-mail about a 2006 Ford Taurus glove-box door. Glancing out the left-side window, he paused and thought: *Just no telling, even after all these years, which part someone might need next. If there is a pattern, it's way beyond my bean's pay grade.*

He inspected the totaled white Ford Focus that had been deposited in the incoming lot. *The left-front of this car is worthless – trash. And since it was underwater for hours – and in brackish water at that – all the electrical items are junk, too. However, the right side doors, panels, and trunk are still sellable. That's about it. I'll make them a low-ball offer.*

Gerald called Exceptional back at 11:11 AM.

"Hello, you've reached Exceptional Rent-A-Car in uptown Charlotte," a female voice announced. *She sounds so chipper for a Sunday morning.*

"Yes, could I speak with Steve Simonz?" Gerald asked, while rocking in his once-dark-gray-but-now-nearly-black, high-back desk chair.

"Sure, I'll transfer you. Just one second."

"This is Steve. What can I do for you?"

"Steve, this is Gerald Zowen at Shipyard Boulevard Auto Salvage in Wilmington."

"Oh, yes, Gerald. How are you doing?"

"Well, I could stand to find some gold."

"I hear ya! Couldn't we all? Well, are you interested in making us an offer for that gently used, low-mileage, one-owner, white 2011 Ford Focus?" Steve was laughing.

"Gently used? You are a comedian on the side, aren't you, Steve?" Gerald was chuckling now, too.

"Well, just shoot me a number, Gerald. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking three hundred, Steve. This car is toast – smushy [*sic*] toast. You and I both know that it was underwater for at least two hours."

“Gerald, you’re hurting me. It’s Sunday. Show me some mercy.” Steve was laughing again. “Can we go five hundred, big guy?” *Big guy? How does he know my waist size?*

“No, that’s a little rich for my blood, Steve. I’m just a poor junkyarder, merely eking out a plebeian existence.”

“Ok, how about four-fifty, Gerald? I bet you will triple or quadruple your investment in six months or less.” *Investment? Is this guy high on dust remover?*

“Four-twenty-five. Final offer.” Gerald was serious again.

“Deal. You got it, Gerald. I’ll fax the paperwork over to you shortly.” *Darn, maybe I should have gone lower.*

“Thanks, Steve. Take care.” Gerald hung up the old corded desk phone. He loved this reliable landline connection. *Now, why in the world did I buy that car?*

Chapter 19

Susan opened the door to room 120 and flopped down on the bed. *What a nightmare it all has become. Mark is dead. I have no source of income. It's over. I'm finished. I don't want to go back to Charlotte. I don't want to return to Qualla. I don't want to tell my parents that Mark is dead and that we were headed for divorce. I don't want to answer any more questions. These questions will never stop. I can tell. I'll be questioned and doubted the rest of my life. Five, ten, twenty years from now, and they will still be asking me questions. It will never end. I'm that wicked woman to them. I don't want any more humiliation. How did that yellow stain get on the ceiling? I don't want to see Mark's dead body in a casket. I don't want to see his gray face. No way! I don't want to attend any funeral or memorial service for Mark. I could never face Mark's friends again. Never. Charlotte is cursed for me. I don't want to live anymore. I'm done with it. I quit. I want out of this Earth-life.*

Susan opened her pill box and took out the remaining nine OxyContin pills that she was saving. She crushed them and swallowed the chalky powder. She chased it down the hatch with a swig of the now-warm PBR beer-swill that Greg had left on the dresser. Death would be assured now. She had just ingested her exit ticket.

She then made her way to the balcony and sat down on the salt-air-rusted metal chair. She repositioned the foam seat cushion, covering the worst spots. It was still quite foggy, even though it was almost noon. The temperature was only 68°F. Hardly anyone was on the beach, just some runners and a few shell searchers. Then an older man and his apparent

grandson walked by with a metal detector and a plastic black-and-yellow spade. *Wonder if they find a gold earring.*

Her mind began to ebb and flow with the surf. *Mark loved these mild, steel-gray, overcast days. I guess this will be the last one that I will ever see. I'll be joining you shortly, Mark, wherever that might be. Though, maybe you don't want to see me ever again. I can certainly understand that. But, we had some nice times. It sure was a strange life, wasn't it, Mark? So sorry about the ending. Maybe it just changes form now, or goes entirely formless. I guess you already know about Heaven, or the next phase: perhaps some metaphysical adventure? Or, maybe eternal, dark, cold silence? No, not that, Mark.*

She gazed out at the sea. Waves. *It all moves in waves. Crazy waves.*

A lone seagull flew up to her balcony railing. It was loudly cawing as it hovered. *It must think that I have some food. 'Sorry, no bread, winged one. I know that it's no easy life on this planet for birds like you.' Yeah, such a constant battle for survival for just about all creatures. 'I guess to you seagulls, I appear to have it made.' No food procurement issues. If they only knew how hard it could get mentally and emotionally for a human being. 'Be glad that you only have basic needs and simple desires, high flyer. Just be glad.' If only ...*

Then the bird flew away, alighting on a dead crab halfway down the beach, some thirty yards away.

Susan's throat was feeling very dry. She pushed herself up and out of the chair, and dragged her numb body inside. She

found her last bottled water and took a swig. She then grabbed her handbag and shuffled back to the balcony. She barely landed on the seat.

Twenty minutes had now passed since Susan had taken the nine pills. She already felt like she was being encased in concrete. Breathing was an uphill struggle. Her heart rate was slowing. Her ability to focus was fading fast. She couldn't walk back inside her motel room if she had to. She felt totally immobilized.

Her mind meandered further. *So, this is where it will end. I never imagined that I'd die at a beach when I was a five-year-old girl, running around on the reservation in the Smoky Mountains. Who will find my body? Ah, who cares? Does that even matter? Transition will occur one way or another.*

Susan gazed back out at the most-distant part of the sea, looking for the horizon. She couldn't make it out due to the dense fog. *This fog is so disorienting. Maybe that's why Mark loved it so much. Almost like a mind drug in itself. It seems to dissociate the thoughts. You can project your thoughts onto it and watch them go ... wow and flutter. A gray wafting canvas. Ethereal etchings. Mark would have loved that one. Points! He secretly wanted to become some kind of neo-beat hipster poet. I know he did. No one makes it big as a poet anymore. Do they? Gosh, what drew me to him? He was a kind and handsome guy with unique features. Almost looked like an international spy when he wore that tan tweed blazer. How I was so intrigued with him at first sight. I am going to miss his cock. It was a perfect fit. Such an arty guy. Ah, that time he painted me in the nude, literally, in a mechanical room at WCU. That music he played on the CD player. Really dreamy*

surreal sounds. It took three days to wash all of that acrylic paint off. Crazy ideas. One after another. With an unmistakable penchant for unprofitability. If there was money to be lost, he was in line. A constant certainty. I was so naïve back then. A shy studious Cherokee girl. An easy mark for Mark. Mark would've written that one down. Always a pen in his pocket. All those times with Mark in Boone. Howard's Knob on that cold winter day. Watching the snow squalls move in from the west. He held me tight and kissed me. The 'I love you' soundtrack he made for me. Gosh, that music was so cool. The valley below turning white. Dusted. We almost slid off the mountain coming back down. Our times at the Klan Dike Café. It's all gone. Irrevocably. Can never go back. The past has passed us by. Wow, am I starting to think like him in my final dying moments? Always playing word games. Why the hell was he in my motel room? And under the goddam bed? He actually stayed under the bed for at least thirty minutes. He had to have. What did he think of Rick? Hell, what did he think of me?! I know what he was thinking ... 'What a fucking whore!' And, he just stayed down there recording my moans. Too strange. It's all too damn weird. How'd I end up here? I was going to be a success in the white man's world. I did it the right way. And, I didn't cheat on Mark until this crazy weekend. And, it doesn't count anyway. We were already kaput. Our marriage was already in the casket before I came down here to bury it. Another line Mark would've loved. I swear I am channeling his spirit. He's probably fighting it all the way. Being jostled in the offsets. Dangerous riptides. I wonder when that sign was put up. I wonder when it gets replaced. I don't think Mark ever cheated on me. No, he didn't. I know he didn't. He was a gentle guy. He never hit me. Never

even touched me in anger. Not even when I was in full-throttle, bitch-witch mode. I knew he wouldn't. Maybe that's why I got so nasty with him. I could get away with it. But, I was a good girl back then. I got good grades. I was going to be successful. It was going to be a good life. I was not an evil person. Thank God, we didn't have kids. That would've been the worst. I couldn't have ended it this way if I had a child. I would've struggled on somehow living off welfare and food stamps. Probably just become another alcoholic pill-popper on the reservation. I never wanted to get hooked on prescription painkillers, but damn, that stuff is so fucking addictive. I know that I'm not the only one hooked on those damn pills in this zero-tolerance-for-pain nation. I wonder how my parents are doing. What might they be doing at this very moment? Mom is probably watching the We or Lifetime channel in the living room, while sipping her favorite herbal tea. Dad is probably piddling around the house, doing simple projects to stay out of mom's hair. I'll miss them. Immensely. Forever. And, I know they'll miss me. Terribly. Gosh, I love them so much. I don't want to hurt them, but I can't endure this anymore. My hurt is the greatest. No one else has to walk in my moccasins. No one else. They'll never understand what led to all of this. My God, the fog seems to be getting denser. Maybe it's the damn oxycodone. All I see is gray. Soft gray clouds. They look like pillows going on forever. I can almost feel them. Well, I better write that note now. I probably only have ten more minutes left. I wonder who will find it. Does the cleaning lady know English? Maybe she'll pass it on to someone. And maybe they'll forward it on to someone who knew me. Maybe. Oh, what the hell am I thinking? This is Mark's madness. His spirit has invaded my brain. I can feel it. He's exacting his revenge

in my last cognizant minutes. As nice as he usually was, he could be evil that way with his bizarre mind games. 'Hey Mark, I know it's you. Ok, you win. Whatever, hon. You'll only have my brain for another five minutes. Maybe just three. Then, it's all over, hon. You won't be able to torment my soul anymore. Nevermore. Never – that's a really long time, Mark.'

Susan opened her handbag. Her right hand slowly and lethargically fumbled around inside, feeling the hidden pocket where her car keys were always kept. She could tell that there was nothing in there as her fingers traced the thin fabric. Her index and middle fingers brushed over the pouch once more, just to make sure. *Nothing. They're gone. Huh?*

She was startled by the revelation. *Where are my car keys? It certainly doesn't matter now, but that's odd. I know they were in there. Did Mark take them when he came to my motel room? Was that what he wanted? But, why did he want them? He didn't drive off that night in our Dodge Neon. Was he going to return the rental car in Wilmington and drive off in our Neon, going back to Charlotte, leaving me stranded at Carolina Beach? Well, it hardly matters now. Fuck it! It's way too late to figure it out now. Gosh, my mind feels like overcooked, mushy spaghetti. I wonder if the guys who built this motel balcony are still alive. I wonder if they're still pumping. Oh, I've lost my mind. And, I don't want to find it ... ever again. Never.*

She pulled out a small pad of white notepaper and a blue ball-point pen. She sighed and gasped. This simple task had left her out of breath. She was starting to turn blue. Her drugged mind fumbled over her condensing thoughts. *Whew, not long now. Not long at all, Susan. I'm certainly on the exit ramp now. It is really setting in now, like cement in my veins. Hope I can*

still write. The sea could care less, I know. The sea, the sea, the sea. The sea sees me ... and just has another wave-crashing laugh. Another splash. Yes, the sea has seen it all. All of humankind's nautical foibles and coastal follies. 'Ah, Mark, there you are again. You bastard, you!' The sounds, sights and scents of the surf will all be here tomorrow. The morning sea breeze will greet the happy faces of the vacationers and toss their hair. It will still be a great beach for tourists. Just remove my corpse promptly. Don't let it start to decompose and stink up the place. I don't want to spoil someone's summervacation by shocking their seven-year-old daughter. 'Mommy, there's a dead woman there.' Lovely. Just lovely. Not!

Susan managed to grasp the pen in her right hand, while holding the little pad in her left hand. *What kind of closing statement should I write? I can barely hold this pen. This square-shaped pad of paper feels like a marshmallow.*

The blue ink's trail left only a few words as Susan's life on this oblate spheroid expired.

Floating. Floating farther ... away. Not sad.

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At 11:17 AM Sunday morning, Susan's body was found by the Hispanic cleaning lady, Louisa. The motel's checkout time was 11:00. Louisa finally opened the door after three knocks and three "Hello, housekeeping" shouts, even though a *Do Not Disturb* placard hung from the rusting doorknob.

Louisa scanned the room. She quickly noticed that the sliding glass door to the balcony was open. When she saw Susan's

stiff, lifeless, gray body on the balcony, she freaked. She ran back to the motel office, hysterically screaming, “El diablo mató a la mujer!” [The devil killed the woman!]

Chapter 20

It was 1:20 PM at the Mimosa Funeral Home in Locust. The Sunday afternoon memorial service for Fred was almost over. Travis had just glanced at his cell phone for the third time. *Well, I guess Mark is not coming to his best friend's funeral service. Wonder why. Did something happen to him?*

After the eulogy and miscellaneous closing remarks, Travis started to leave with his wife, Nancy, at his side. They met a common friend in the parking lot. It was zany Jeremy. He looked like he had seen a ghost.

"Guess what I just read on the internet, Travis?" He was holding up his smartphone.

"Let me guess ... Mark and Susan joined a peyote cult in New Mexico?"

"No, but it's about Mark. He's dead, man! His car went off a bridge down at Carolina Beach."

"Are you sure that's our Mark van Buren?"

"Yes. I saw his picture on the news website."

"Man, this is too much! Fred and now Mark. Both dead in less than a week." *This is unbelievable.*

"Well, I gotta run. Let's talk later. Try to stay alive."

"Yeah, you, too, Jeremy."

Jeremy disappeared around the corner. Travis and Nancy just looked at each other, stunned.

“Honey, are we in the twilight zone?” Nancy asked.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Travis stated, while trying to take it all in.

A gust of warm, summer-flora-scented, afternoon air whistled through the green-leafed, kudzu-enveloped, deciduous trees as they drove away.

There would be no funeral for Mark.

Chapter 21

David Scrapalski was a twenty-eight-year-old bio-tech lab specialist, originally from Pittsburgh, who lived on Kittrell Drive in north Raleigh. His modest one-and-a-half story abode was in Anderson Heights, an older neighborhood that had begun to gentrify. It was flush with mature oak trees and young professionals. There was even a nice little park across the street where he often jogged. He really liked the area and didn't see himself moving again.

David owned a 2011 white Ford Focus, the model with a normal trunk – not the hatchback version. It was a nice little sedan. It got decent gas mileage and was easy to maneuver and park in the city. He liked it. He washed it weekly and waxed it when he couldn't remember the last time he waxed it. He was going to keep this car for at least ten years, he told himself.

Hurricane-strength storms rarely make direct hits on Raleigh. However, tropical storms seem to pass over the Triangle area every few years. On that last Monday in June – the 25th – a nasty one did just that.

Tropical Storm Dorn unloaded five inches of rain in eighteen hours on the Raleigh area. Every creek in the city had flooded to some degree. Crabtree Creek jumped its banks as everyone in the Capital City knew it would. It became a giant debris flow.

David's house was up on a hill, so flooding was not an issue for his property. However, the storm packed 50 MPH

sustained winds with gusts over 65 MPH. By 9:30 PM the wind was whipping the trees. At 11:11 PM he had no power.

The temperature in his house was a comfortable 70°F when the electricity went out, and it was mild outside, too. Thus, David wasn't too concerned about cooling. He was able to fall asleep by midnight, his usual workweek time. The wind hissed like a nefarious serpent throughout the night, waking him up occasionally. Some dogs howled; one yelped.

At 7:30 in the morning he walked out to retrieve *The News & Observer*, the Raleigh daily newspaper. A very distressing sight greeted him. The partially diseased sycamore tree in his neighbor's yard had come down. One of its medium-size branches had crashed onto the trunk of his Ford Focus during the stormy night. The rest of the car looked ok. There was just a nasty series of dents and gouges in the middle of the trunk door.

He opened the dinged trunk and checked the hinges; they were ok. It appeared that the only body piece he needed to replace was the trunk door. He then took a picture of the damaged trunk door for his insurance company.

David went back inside his house. The kitchen light was on. He warmed up a bagel and made some coffee, and settled over his laptop in the den.

He found his insurance company's website. He e-mailed them a claim with an attached photo of the trunk damage. He wondered if his trunk was still water-tight. *The trunk will leak now. I wonder how long it will take for them to compensate me. Well, I don't want to wait around.*

He began to look online for a white 2011 Ford Focus trunk door, first checking the auto salvage yards in Wake County. *Nothing, just a lot of hatchbacks. Drats!* He widened his search area to 100 miles. Still nothing. *Someone around here has to have this part. It's not like it's as rare as gold.*

He scratched his forehead. *Was that a dried-up zit or a scab?* When he increased the search area to a radius of 150 miles, he got a hit. A parts yard in Wilmington had one. He wrote down *Shipyards Boulevard Auto Salvage* with the address and phone number. *I'll call them from work to verify that they have it. If they do, I'll go down Friday morning.*

David went back outside. The neighbor had already removed and diced up the fallen sycamore tree with a chainsaw. He apologized profusely to David. David just told him that these *acts of God* happen and that the insurance companies would sort it out.

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At 1:05 PM David stepped out of the GroPhirst nano-organic lab in Research Triangle Park, a few miles southeast of Durham, and called *Shipyards Boulevard Auto Salvage* in Wilmington. The sun was hot and bright.

"Hello, this is Gerald."

"Is this *Shipyards Boulevard Auto Salvage*?" David cautiously asked to make sure he had the right number.

"You've got him." *So, he is it.*

“Excellent. Say, would you have a trunk door for a white 2011 Ford Focus? The sedan model with a real trunk – not the hatchback.”

“Hold on a sec and I’ll check,” Gerald replied as he depressed some keys on his computer keyboard.

“Sure, no rush.” David heard him clicking away. It was hot outside. He looked for a shady spot. *Where is a mature healthy oak tree when you need one in the ‘City of Oaks’?*

“Oh yeah, I’ve got it,” Gerald suddenly announced. “That car just came in the other day. *How could I forget that car?* The right and rear body parts are ok, but the left and front sides are shot.”

“Can you hold it for me ‘til Friday?”

“You got it. When can we expect you?”

“Oh, I should be there by 9:00 AM.”

“That’s fine. My assistant will be here at that time.”

“Do I need to give you a deposit to hold it?”

“No, you seem genuinely interested in it. Just come on down and get it before five in the afternoon.”

“Thank you, sir.” David ended the call. *So, I’m going to the coast for the weekend. I’ve heard of medical vacations. I guess this will be an auto-part vacation. It’s about time I took a day off. I can’t remember the last time I took any time off. I’m becoming a work-eat-sleep-work robot. This will be just what the doctor ordered.*

Chapter 22

News of the deaths of both Mark and Susan had reached the Charlotte news websites and regional media outlets by Monday afternoon. It was all over the evening newscasts in the Port City and the Queen City.

Common friends were shocked and puzzled. None of the news stories suggested that Mark and Susan were having marriage difficulties. And, only one website even mentioned that they were staying in separate motel rooms, or had arrived in separate cars.

The conclusion that the casual viewer/reader would draw was that Mark was partying a little too hard to be behind the wheel, lost control of his car, crashed and drowned. His wife, subsequently, was overcome by unbearable grief and committed suicide. End of tragic story.

There was no mention of any gold in any news report.

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At the convenience store on NC 710 at US 74, the store owner was watching the Fayetteville 6:00 PM local newscast. He listened to the attractive, black, female newscaster as he counted the twenties in the till.

"A Charlotte couple died in separate incidents over the weekend at Carolina Beach. Mark van Buren, age thirty-eight, died early Saturday morning after crashing his car on a bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway. His rented car went off the bridge and sank to the bottom of the channel. Rescue divers

recovered his body around 5:30 AM. Mr. van Buren was still strapped in his seat belt.”

Pictures of Mark and Susan were now on the TV screen. The newscaster continued. “His thirty-four-year-old wife, Susan van Buren, died eight hours later that afternoon, around 1:30 PM from an apparent suicide. Preliminary testing suggests an opioid overdose. An empty OxyContin pill bottle was found in her motel room.”

Ah, the van Burens! That's them. What in the wacky wide world happened to them? Ah, Carolina Beach. Still crazy after all these years.

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While on the internet, scanning the local news, Gerald ran across a short article about the two deaths. But, without any picture of the car, he paid little attention to it, and was quickly on to the next story.

Then his dogs started barking. Then they started to whimper. It was time to feed them and give them a bone.

Chapter 23

At 6:26 AM Friday morning, June 29th, David was pulling out of his driveway in his 2011, white-suede Ford Focus. The forecast called for a very hot day – possible triple-digit heat. It was already feeling balmy. *It's going to be a scorcher. Hope the A/C can keep up.*

Soon he was on the I-440 beltway. Traffic was still light. *Great, I beat the congestion. I should be able to make good time.*

He took the exit for I-40 East, which really dives south-southeast, as he thought about the weekend. *After I snag that trunk door, the weekend is free. I'll get a hotel room in downtown Wilmington. It's a nice scene down there. Yeah, one with a view of the river. It would be convenient. Yeah, that way I can just walk if I decide to hit some bars. The car can just stay parked. Or, should I rent a room at a beach? That'll be mega-expensive, though. I'll just see how it goes.*

Once on I-40 East, the trip to Wilmington was a pleasantly uneventful two-hour trek. Nobody from work was zapping his cell phone. His hyper-dramatic ex-girlfriend had now gone a whole two weeks without trying to bait him into a text war. *Maybe she's found someone else by now. God, I hope so. Pity the poor fellow.*

David wheeled into Shipyard Boulevard Auto Salvage at 8:42 AM. The gates to the wrecked automobile yard were locked. Two full-grown German Shepherds were barking vociferously at him as he stepped from his car. He walked towards a small house that appeared to be the office. He knocked on the door.

The bone-white, wooden door creaked opened. A gaunt Caucasian man in his early 40s with sallow skin and a thick brown mustache greeted him. "Hello, and what can I do for you today?"

"Hello. My name is David Scrapalski. I believe that you are holding a 2011 white Ford Focus trunk door for me. I need it for that car." David pointed to the damaged trunk of his Ford Focus. "Are you Gerald?"

"No, Gerald is not here right now." *Well, he really didn't sound like Gerald.*

"Oh, ok."

"Gerald took the morning off, but he mentioned to me that you would be coming by." *Oh yeah, Gerald said that his assistant would be here. Where's my memory chip today?*

"Yes, now I remember him telling me that someone else would be here."

"That someone else is me; I'm Dale, his assistant. And, yes, that car is still on the lot. Let me secure the dogs. Give me just a minute."

Dale walked out the back door of the office-house and called the dogs over to a chain-link-fenced pen.

Three minutes later, he returned and told David where the car was located. He sketched a simple map of the lot on the back of a Krispy Kreme doughnut napkin. Dale then handed David the car keys.

“Thanks,” David said. “And don’t worry, I won’t drive away with it.”

“You won’t be able to drive that car one foot. It’s totaled. It got smashed on the left side really bad. Then it sank in the Intracoastal Waterway.”

“Well, all I need is a good trunk.”

“Ok, good luck. I’ll be here.”

David walked out of the office and located the wrecked 2011 white Ford Focus next to a sideswiped 2005 green Honda Civic and an overgrown blackberry bush. He looked at the driver-side body of the car first. *Wow, this baby got creamed alright. I wonder if anyone died.*

He then proceeded to the passenger side of the white, four-door sedan. The right side was in great shape except for the mirror; it was cracked. He kept walking to the rear and turned the corner. And right there was the much-sought-after trunk door. *Yes! It looks ok.*

Surprisingly, it was in great shape. There wasn’t a scratch on it. Amazingly, it had been unscathed by the accident. *Yes! This should work just fine. Well worth the drive.*

David then inserted the trunk key and turned it. The trunk door opened cleanly. *Score! We got a winner.*

He peered inside. The brackish-water-permeated-carpet odor was strong. The trunk light didn’t come on; the battery had been removed.

The sun was almost directly overhead, so light was not really an issue. The soggy piece of carpet and plastic enclosure that usually covered the spare tire had been dislodged. Half of the spare tire was showing. He remembered that a shard of metal had destroyed the sidewall on his spare. *Wow, I could use that doughnut spare, too.*

David began to undo the wing nut with his left hand. When he pulled up the spare tire with a slightly rusted rim, he saw the start-up capital for his next venture: thirty-eight pounds of solid gold in two semicircular fillets. *Holy cow! That looks like gold!*

Just over six days later, Mark's golden motherlode had finally been seen by another human being.

The C-shaped golden pair was still intact. Yes, right where Mark had secured them on the night of the phantom. The golden duo had waited patiently for rediscovery. *Wow! Look at this! This is amazing! Un-freaking believable! What luck!*

He grabbed the smaller one and felt it. He ran his right thumbnail along its surface. *Damn, that's gold! Pure fucking gold! And quite a bit of it. Obviously no one knows that it's in here. This feels like I'm entering some bizarre Twilight-Zone-like story. Is Rod Serling's ghost around the corner? Somebody placed this gold here; molten gold doesn't just solidify in wrecked car trunks. Was the owner killed? Foul play of some sort? A mafia-esque hit made to look like a collision? I need to find out more about this car later. The gold pieces are too heavy and a little too big to stuff in my pants or under my shirt. It's just too risky to move it right now with Dale up in the office. He may be watching me.*

A colorful dragonfly alighted on the larger golden boomerang. David began to appreciate his golden dilemma. *Now, how do we do this? How do we extricate this gold without detection? Should I try to distract Dale? Wait, maybe we just extricate the whole car from this junkyard by buying it. Yeah, that's it. I'll just purchase the whole car. Genius! And to think my ex said I was stupid because I only got a 960 on the SAT. Ha-ha. I'll mail her a postcard from Tahiti. 'Wish you were here – Not!'*

David looked back at the house-office, about fifty yards away. Dale was on the front porch looking at him. *Oh, shit!*

David carefully placed the gold fillets back under the spare tire. He screwed the wing nut down tightly and placed the plastic piece and carpet back over it. He closed the trunk and began walking back towards Dale. *I wonder how long he was watching me. Damn. Not good.*

When David arrived at the front porch, Dale had already gone back inside the house-office. David opened the door and went inside.

Dale looked up from the desk when David entered. "Will that trunk door do the trick, sir?" he asked in a business-as-usual manner.

"I think it will, Dale. In fact, there are many parts on that car that I could use in the future." David hoped he seemed believable and not too excited about a horribly damaged automobile.

"Your car looks like it only needs a trunk, but if you want to buy right door panels, I certainly won't stop you." *Good. Great*

answer, pal. This confirms that Dale has no idea what's in that car's trunk.

"Listen, I'd like to make you an offer for the whole car. I can use it for future repairs."

"Sir, there's something I must disclose to you about that particular Ford Focus ..."

"Ok." Here comes the catch: It's not for sale for sentimental reasons. Or, you can't take the whole car because the left front-end is part of a post-accident investigation. Or, we don't hold clear and marketable title to the car; thus, we can't sell it to you as one whole vehicle. No, no. Please, dear God, no.

Dale continued. "That car was underwater for a couple of hours. All of the electrical parts are totally shot. Worthless. Kaputski. And since the water was brackish, most of the mechanical linkages and small mechanisms – especially those with thin-gauge metal springs – will fail in the near future from corrosion, if they haven't already."

"I hear you loud and clear," David calmly stated. "And, I truly appreciate your honesty by making that disclosure, Dale. But, I'm still interested in making an offer for the whole car. I plan on driving my little Focus until the sheet-metal welds become unfocused." *Whack-job.*

"Ok, what kind of figure did you have in mind?"

"Would you guys take twelve hundred dollars for it?" David hoped that this number and his facial expression found the right balance. He didn't want to look too eager to buy at any price – and set off alarm bells – possibly leading to a thorough

inspection of the car, nor too disinterested to appear not willing to offer a higher amount. He wanted to let Dale know that he was legitimately – yet reasonably – interested.

“I’ll forward that offer to Gerald. He has to approve and write up any whole-vehicle purchase. He should be in between one and one-thirty.”

“Ok, thanks. Here’s my card.” Dale studied it as David walked out. *Scrapalski? Doesn’t a Scrapalski play for some NHL team? Is it the Hurricanes? No. The Sabres? No. The Penguins? ...*

Dale walked out of the office/living room as David got into his car. “I’ll make sure that Gerald calls you,” he pledged just before David closed his door. *I certainly hope so. But, if not ...*

David gave him a cursory wave as he pulled out of the visitor lot. Dale’s expression was hard to read. *If Gerald doesn’t call me by two, I’ll call him. I’ll be coming back here alright. / David saw something in that car’s trunk. I just know that he did.*

David headed for downtown Wilmington.

Chapter 24

As soon as David had driven down Shipyard Boulevard far enough to be out of his line of sight, Dale walked down to the wrecked, white, now-of-paramount-concern Ford Focus. He had seen David looking down at some object in the trunk. *What the hell was he looking at in there? He seemed to have handled something. But, what?*

He unlocked the trunk. All looked normal. It just had the bold fragrance of *L'eau d' Intracoastal Waterway*. It was already 92°F. The trunk was ripe. *Whew! What an odor! Send in the crabs, there must be crabs ...*

Dale scanned the low-pile, tightly woven, still-wet, black carpet. It had a slight ridge in it. He grasped and removed it. *He seemed to have his hands down in the center of the trunk. What was he holding? The spare tire? What's so magical about this doughnut spare? Most people hate these things. Maybe there's something under the spare tire.*

He lifted up the black, plastic, spare-tire enclosure and unscrewed the tire-retaining bolt's wing nut. He pulled the tire up and out with both hands. When he saw the two pieces of yellowish metal, he immediately knew why David wanted the whole car. *Holy cow! That's gold! This is why he wants this car so bad – it has gold in it. I wonder how much this gold is worth. My real payday has finally arrived.*

Dale wasn't the sharpest tack in the box, but he was good at figuring out people's ulterior motives. He thought about the situation as it now stood. *Obviously, David saw the gold in here. That's pretty much a given. And, just as certain, Gerald*

has not seen the gold in here; thus, he knows nothing about it. They must've never opened the trunk after the accident. The police would have never knowingly left gold in this car; it would have been impounded. It's a pretty safe bet that only me and David know that there's gold in this car's trunk. Gerald told me that the driver of this rental car died. And, his wife committed suicide later that day. So, she's certainly not coming after it. Thus, it must be only David and I; only the two of us know. If anyone else knew there was this much gold in this car's trunk, they would have retrieved it by now. Yeah, I would bet my life that only me and David know that there is gold in this trunk. Gerald has to be in the dark. He would never allow so much gold to sit in there. Never. Especially not in a car in which he intends to sell the trunk door. Obviously, he's totally clueless. He'll be back soon. Must think smart and act fast.

Dale walked back towards the house-office. He got in his burgundy 2002 Chrysler Town & Country minivan, and drove up to the white Ford Focus, keeping his van in between the sight line from the office to the Ford Focus. *Please, no customers now. And please, no early arrival by Gerald or David.*

Dale quickly loaded the two boomerang-shaped gold nuggets into a couple of black, four-mil-thick, plastic Hefty bags. The extra-thick trash liners were completely opaque. Even in the bright sun, the gold crescents were invisible.

He then slid the bagged gold under his minivan's rearmost seat. Then he placed an old blanket over the bags of gold. Next, he put some milk crates that were full of tools and automotive fluids on top of them.

He scanned the lot and looked up at the house-office. There was no sign of anyone. The only creature watching him seemed to be a lone crow that was sitting on a 1968 Dodge Polara station wagon's luggage rack, just a few vehicles down from him.

Dale then carefully replaced the spare tire, the plastic piece, and the black carpet on top. He closed the trunk and got in his minivan. He pulled up to the office, parked, and went inside and wrote a short message on a white piece of notepaper with a bold marker. It was 9:58 AM. The note read:

Back in 15 minutes (10:15)

-Dale

He taped it to the front storm door's upper glass pane and locked up the office. He went back to the dog pen and let the German Shepherds out. They barked loudly for a minute, very happy to be out of the small fenced area.

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Dale lived less than two miles away, on Van Buren Street (as fate would have it) in the Sunset Park neighborhood in west Wilmington. His wife had died two years ago from liver disease; he lived alone. His minivan was on his concrete driveway in only four and a half minutes.

Dale parked at the end of the concrete driveway and closed the privacy-wall gate behind him. The minivan was inside the enclosure now. The whole back yard was surrounded by an eight-foot-high, wooden, double-slatted privacy wall that Dale had installed by himself five years ago. It was still in good

condition. None of the gothic tops had broken off yet, and there were no splits or holes in the planks.

He walked to his metal shed and got the medium shovel, and then walked to the corner of the side and rear fences behind the shed and dug a two-and-a-half-foot-deep hole in the soft, grayish white sand. He had his golden burial pit dug in only four minutes.

Dale then placed the two, bagged, golden fillets in the pit. He quickly covered them with the sand that he had removed. Finally, Dale scattered some adjacent top sand over the excavated area along with some fallen pine needles. *People get caught or found out by not attending to the small details. Don't make a million-dollar mistake, Dale. Make it look like no shovel ever hit the ground back here. Do it right.*

When he was done, there were no signs of digging. From start to finish took less than eight minutes. He looked around while putting the shovel back in the shed; the coast still looked to be clear – not one eye was seen. *Success! If I play this right and be patient, I'll have more than I need for the rest of my life. Don't blow it, Dale. Stay steady. Keep calm.*

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Dale was back at the Shipyard Boulevard Auto Salvage house-office in just sixteen minutes from the time he left. No one was in the parking lot waiting. No one was on the porch. *Perfect. David is not back, and Gerald is not here yet. Excellent! Couldn't have gone any better.*

He took the note off the storm door, wadded it up and threw it in the rubber wastebasket. *I think I can safely assume that no one dropped by. There are no messages.*

He sat back in Gerald's desk chair and popped open a Yoo-hoo chocolate drink. He started to think of the possible upcoming scenarios. *Gerald arrives at one o'clock. I tell him that David did indeed show up and looked at the car. I'll tell Gerald that he was acting very odd, like he was high on drugs. Yeah, that's it; I'll characterize David as an insane, high-tech, Triangle-area dope fiend. I'll tell Gerald that he wants to buy the whole car for twelve hundred dollars. But then Gerald may ask me what I think his motivation is. I'll tell him that maybe he thinks there's something über-cool about the 2011 Ford Focus. Who knows? I'll pawn him off as an eccentric hipster type. Maybe Gerald will just say, 'Sure, you can have that submerged car for that price.' Or, maybe Gerald calls David and asks for a little more loot. Maybe they settle on fifteen hundred or sixteen hundred. Certainly. Why not? It's in both of their interests to get a deal done. Gerald will never get that much money in parts from that car, given its history. David will obviously go insanely high with the offers in order to get that whole car, believing that there is still over a million dollars of gold in the trunk. He'll never stop making offers. The deal will go down at some price. However, David could give himself away; he could actually surpass the price of a brand new Ford Focus. No, he's not that stupid. If Gerald didn't accept three thousand, I don't think David would go any higher. It would be too risky. He would try to get into the trunk of that car some other way. Maybe poison the dogs one night. And get the shock of his life. But, what would Gerald think if an ultra-high offer is made by David? What happens then? What if David*

isn't rational and offers a crazy amount for the car? Say, four thousand. What then? Gerald would get suspicious and declare: 'No sale.' He'd check every square inch of the car. But, he would find nothing and maybe let the sale go down. Well, assuming David isn't watching him search the car. No, Gerald wouldn't search the car with David present. Gerald would send him away for an hour; he'd employ some delaying tactic. Maybe Gerald will really believe my crazy characterization of David. At some point that Ford Focus will leave the junkyard. At some point the trunk will open. And to David's grand dismay, the gold will be gone. Long gone. He'll be willing to bet the farm that the gold is still in there. He may open the trunk when that smashed Ford Focus is on the flatbed tow truck, just a mile down the road. Or, he may open it in Raleigh in his driveway. It won't really matter; the result will be the same: He will be on the golden warpath. What will be his method of redress? Will he first come after me? Or, go to Gerald? Would he really tell Gerald that there was a boatload of gold in that trunk at nine in the morning? I really doubt it. He'll be gunning for me. And when he calls or arrives, I'll just play dumb. In fact, I'll play dumb with both of them. What if he goes to the police? So, what? It's not illegal to own gold nuggets in this country. Even gold bullion ownership was made legal again in 1974. All forms and types of gold are legal to own in America. So, would he claim that we stole it from someone? From whom? From him? Oh, please. 'Prove it,' the police would say. 'And, precisely where did you unearth these unusually thin gold nuggets, sir?' Yikes. 'Whose property were you on?' Gulp. The police would ask him: 'How did thirty-eight pounds of raw gold end up in a previously submerged wrecked rental car's trunk – a car in which the driver died?'

They would press him. 'And, exactly what do you know about this gold, sir?' Gulp. 'Please speak into the microphone, Mr. Scrapalski.' 'No dice, bro. You want the police to question you in a small room under a bright light for hours and hours? I didn't think so, sport.' Going to the cops just makes David look like a suspect in that driver's death. No, David has no leverage using the law, it would just make him look loony, or worse. He is too smart for that. Will he use a firearm as recourse against me? Will the gold fever hit him that bad? He doesn't seem like the killer type, but one never knows how someone will act when there's over a million dollars right there for the taking. Hands on it one minute, then suddenly snatched away with their dreams and schemes five hours later. He'll most certainly be choleric. He'll be devising a recovery plan. For sure. Would he distance himself and hire a hit-man to off me? But, he has to know where the gold is before I die. He can't just have me snuffed-out without knowing the gold's new location – which I will never divulge. He'll never find it. He's going to be one frustrated SOB, to put it mildly. Better be prepared; David will be rottenly pissed when he sees nothing but black floorboard under that spare tire. Better practice your stoic face now. It's gonna get crazy one way or two ways. All ways, most likely.

Someone was knocking at the door. Oh, shit! Which one is it: Gerald or David? Let's deal with Gerald first – alone. Please not both of them at once. That would be a nightmare.

Dale cautiously slouched over to the door and looked through the highest glass pane from an acute angle. Thank God, it's just the UPS man.

A giant sigh of relief from Dale. He then opened the door and signed for the parcel.

Chapter 25

David grabbed an early lunch at the Burger Thing at Dawson and 3rd. He was craving a veggie Walloper and a mango smoothie. He decided to eat inside when he saw the long line at the drive-thru window. *Screw that! I'm not waiting in that line. That looks like twenty minutes, easy.*

After ordering and receiving his food, he looked for an available table. He saw a two-seater in the corner. *Perfect. Maybe I can eat and think in peace.*

He sat down and began to chomp and slurp away. It was what he needed to quickly get his blood-sugar level up again. He wasn't diabetic, but his doctor had warned him not to go too long between meals. He had fainted just two weeks ago while trying to fast for twenty-four hours, and nearly broke his nose.

Between bites, he noticed a discarded newspaper on the vacated table next to his. He swiped it. It was a copy of the *Wilmington Star-News*. Only the local section remained. He began to peruse it.

A murder on Wooster Street. A crack-cocaine bust near Greenfield Park. A three-car wreck on I-40 near Castle Hayne leaves two people dead. A man in Brunswick County is actively cultivating Venus flytraps in an attempt to save the rare species. The USS North Carolina Battleship's lower hull may be rusting faster than originally thought.

Then he saw a follow-up story on the Charlotte couple who died in separate incidents last weekend at Carolina Beach. The small picture of the wrecked white Ford Focus on a barge arrested his eyes. *There's my lucky car – the focus of my life.*

Charlotte Couple Dies at Carolina Beach

The couple from Charlotte who died in separate events last weekend were not staying together, authorities say. They were estranged. It is not known whether Mark van Buren and Susan van Buren even saw each other last weekend at Carolina Beach. To recap, Mark van Buren died when his rented car crashed and went off the Snow's Cut Bridge early last Saturday morning. He still had his seat belt on when rescue divers removed his body from the Intracoastal Waterway. His blood-alcohol level was .03%, less than half the legal limit in North Carolina. His wife, Susan van Buren, died from an OxyContin overdose last Saturday afternoon, an apparent suicide. Investigators are still seeking more information. If you know anything about either of these incidents, please contact the Carolina Beach Police Department.

Wow, so that's whose gold it was – Mark van Buren. Did he find those golden boomerangs on Carolina Beach? I didn't know that any raw gold was ever found in that sand. Damn, he had it made; dude had it in his trunk, neatly concealed under the spare tire. What the hell went wrong? Was he being chased? Was he nudged off the bridge? But, the right and rear sides of the car have no dents. Why in the hell does he decide to go flying off a humpback bridge just before dawn on a Saturday morning? Was he up all night partying? Was he high on psychoactive drugs? Was he hallucinating? Was it the gold curse? Ha-ha. And, his estranged wife is down there, yet they never see each other. What? If your marriage is on the rocks and getting ready to sink, why go to the same beach? Or, if it was a last attempt to save the marriage, why go in separate cars? And stay in separate motels? Very weird. Maybe he was spying on her? Maybe he was building a divorce case. It's still

way too freaking weird. Hmmm, I wonder if they have fixed that bridge yet.

David slid his tray's trash into the waste receptacle. He walked outside and looked at the directional sign for Carolina Beach. *Well, I've got some time to kill. Let's go look at that confounded bridge.*

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Traffic was already fairly steady at noon as David began to ascend the northern flank of the Snow's Cut Bridge. He tried to go a little slower than the speed limit in order to get a better look at the concrete railing on the right, but the yellow Dodge Dart behind him started to tailgate. *Damn, always some fly on your ass at the worst possible moment.*

When he was almost at the top of the bridge, he saw where Mark's dream ended. There was a ten-foot section of new concrete railing; it was much lighter and whiter than the older concrete around it. *The impact must have killed him. Lucky for you, Mark; you didn't drown, bro. You'd have to be flying to take out a concrete railing like that with a little lightweight car like a Ford Focus. Damn, how fast was he going? 75 MPH? It was a good guess.*

David continued over the bridge and made a right turn at the Lewis Drive traffic light. He then made a right turn onto Bridge Barrier Road, passing behind the strip mall. He drove down this road all the way to the end and parked. He walked over a mound of sand, and proceeded down a little footpath to the southern bank of Snow's Cut, the wide canal that cut through the sand dunes, creating Pleasure Island.

He looked up at the bridge towering overhead. Then he looked down at the water. The northern bridge-pier protector had a

vertical scrape on its wood planking. *Wow, is that the exact spot where Mark's car sank? Is that the spot? Right there?*

David sat down on a thick log on the top of the channel bank. *Someone must have set this log up for long hours of fishing.*

He was about twenty-five feet above the shimmering water's surface. It was a nice view. Boats, motor yachts, sailboats, and noisy jet-skis were passing in both directions. It was already a busy day on the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway.

He then noticed that many live oak trees were in the process of falling into Snow's Cut, due to erosional undercutting. *Mother Nature is always trying to level the playing field. Always trying to flatten the land and fill in the holes, creases and valleys. I bet they have to dredge this channel yearly.* His estimate was almost correct.

He stayed down there for a few minutes reflecting on what had happened to Mark, and how one's life can change – or even cease – in an instant. *When you've got it made is when you really can't let your guard down. You can't get cocky and act foolish. That's where Mark screwed up. That's the lesson I'm going to take away from this.*

He walked back to his car, passing a fisherman on the way. "The seat's all yours."

The nearly toothless, older, ball-capped fisherman just grinned and continued on his way with two fishing rods and an old, army-green, metal tackle box.

David decided to head back to Wilmington, where his gold was waiting. When he was at the top of the Snow's Cut Bridge, he saw the skid marks. They went from his lane – the right northbound lane – all the way over to the new section of

concrete on the left side of the bridge. *Wow, he crossed three lanes. Did his left front tire blow out? But, this would have been mentioned in the news article. Wait, I just saw the left front tire; it wasn't blown out. I wonder what his last thought was. 'Damn, I blew it'? Tough break, Mark. You had it, bro. You fumbled the football at the goal line. I'm running with it now. And, I'm going to score.*

David continued driving north up US 421. He began to feel a little thirsty. Then he thought about getting some drinks and snacks for the hotel room, as he knew it had a small refrigerator and a microwave. *I'll get some popcorn, pretzels, chips, soda, beer ... and condoms. A man should always be prepared.*

He stopped at the Super Wally World in Monkey Junction. It was blistering hot. *Damn, it's torrid today. I wonder if torrid has two r's or one.*

Chapter 26

Gerald rolled up to his unofficial parking space at 1:11 PM in his red 1976 Cadillac, a semi-restored Sedan de Ville. He stepped out with some papers in his hand.

Dale had heard the car pulling in and opened the front door for Gerald. "How are you feeling today, boss?" he ventured.

"Oh, not too bad for being ancient history," Gerald answered.

"Oh, you still get around pretty good, boss. I hope I can still move around as well as you when I'm your age."

"I don't know, Dale; sometimes I feel like one of those Florida scooters is in my imminent future."

"Florida scooter?" Dale looked perplexed.

"A motorized wheelchair."

Gerald walked in, put the papers down on his desk, and sat back in his chair. He looked at his desk calendar. Then he turned to Dale. "Anything happen this morning?"

"That David guy came by earlier. I think it was just before nine o'clock. He said that he would like to buy that white 2011 Ford Focus for twelve hundred bucks."

"Oh, yes, I spoke with him on the phone earlier this week." He started to rub his right ear.

"Mosquito bite?" Dale asked.

"Not sure. Just dead skin, I guess. As for his offer ... well, as you know, I like to at least double the price of what we paid

when selling whole vehicles.” Gerald looked like he was a school teacher.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, boss.” Dale tried to look like the eager-to-learn student. *Just act like it’s another day.*

“Well, for twelve hundred, it’s his. He can have it. That’s almost triple what we paid for it. The damn car was underwater for Christ sakes. I wonder why he’s offering so much. Any ideas?” *Ok, it’s now time to paint David as a techie-turned-dope-fiend flip-out.*

“Boss, he seemed high on something. He was twitching and acting strange. His head kept twisting around. He acted like a paranoid cokehead. Maybe he’s loaded with drug money. He seemed pretty slick. I think he said that he works in the RTP. He’s one of those techies. Maybe money is not an issue with him. Maybe he’s just some weird Ford Focus freak.”

“A Ford Focus freak from the Research Triangle Park? Now, I’ve heard of everything!”

“Maybe it’s the hipster car for his group.”

“Hipster? Wow, I haven’t heard that word in a few decades,” Gerald retorted. “Keep going.”

“He’s an odd duck, boss. Trust me.”

“Well, if his money isn’t odd – as in not counterfeit – I’ll consider it a done deal. Does he want me to call him? Or, is he coming back?”

"I think he said that he would just come back here at two o'clock to talk with you and hammer out the deal. Yeah, that's it; he'll be back at two. I now recall him telling me."

"Ok, good enough, Dale. Thanks for covering for me this morning. Any plans for the weekend. Got a hot date?"

"No, no hot date, boss. Nothing too wild. Just chill out, I guess."

"Well, have a nice weekend. See you on Monday morning."

"You, too. Thanks, boss."

As Dale exited from the porch, he glanced towards the wrecked Ford Focus. *Things will get interesting very soon. Very interesting.*

Chapter 27

David quickly gathered some snacks and soda in his cart at the Super Wally World at Monkey Junction and began looking for condoms. *Where do they stock those damn things?* He could never remember where they were located.

At last he found them on an end-cap display unit in the pharmacy area. There was no way that he was going to ask a Wally World employee where they were. Why, he was a man.

He then looked for the quickest checkout lane. A cute, dark-skinned girl caught his searching eye.

"I'm open," Chantelle said with a big smile. *Gorgeous. I bet she's from the West Indies.*

"Thanks," David said, while reading a copy of *The Charlotte Observer*.

"What's the big story?" Chantelle asked while scanning his junk food and assorted, carbonated, diet beverages.

"Oh, it's not really a big story, I guess, in the global scheme of things." David then showed her the article about the deaths of Mark and Susan. Both of their photos accompanied the three-paragraph, mid-section article.

Chantelle looked like she had seen a ghost. "Mon dieu!" Chantelle exclaimed much louder than she intended. "Oh, my lord!"

"Are you French?" David inquired, unfazed by her outburst, assuming she was just shocked by the death of a couple at the beach.

"I was born in Haiti, but I've lived in the United States for the past five years," she politely stated in that unmistakable tropical island accent. "I met that man in the photo. Yes, it was him. I am sure of it. Ab-sooo-lutely."

"You met Mark van Buren?" David wasn't sure if he could trust her judgment, but was incredibly intrigued by her remark. *Is she pulling my leg? I wish she'd pull on my third one later on.*

"Yes. I know it was him. He came through my line late last Friday night. Well, actually it was Saturday morning, maybe about two AM." *She sounds convincing. If she's a liar, she's damn good. I think she's telling the truth. I'll just give her the benefit of my current state of belief.*

"Wow, what was he buying, if I may ask? A case of beer, perhaps, Chantelle?" He read her name tag.

David felt confident that he had guessed Mark's just-before-two-o'clock purchase. Beer drinkers are always aware of the two o'clock hour in North Carolina. They often rush to the stores near the beaches at 1:50 AM on weekend nights to get their last supply of suds.

"He bought a matching pair of dark-red suitcases. And, no, not any beer. Yes, I can see them now. They were wine-colored. A large and small one." *A pair of suitcases? Didn't he bring luggage down in the rental car? Did he leave Charlotte in that much of a rush? Why does he need to buy a set of suitcases at two in the morning? Man, this gets weirder by the moment.*

Chantelle scanned the chocolate-flavored condoms and looked at David. "I bet these taste good." *What did she just say?! / I bet that line got his attention. Yep, it sure did.*

<gulp> David was a little flustered. “Uh, yeah, I think so.”
Damn, she knocked me off balance with that line.

“It comes to \$18.18. How would you like to pay?”

“I’ll use my debit card. Thanks.”

“Just slide it in the slot,” Chantelle said while licking her upper lip. *Slide it ‘in’ the slot? Not ‘through’ the slot? An interesting choice of a preposition, I’d say. Hmmm, this could be a great day followed up by an amazing night. But, I need to stay gold-focused. That’s the only priority. Don’t get distracted by her thing. Sex can wait for now, they’ll be plenty of that later.*

David almost missed her salacious signal, but caught her pointed tongue just before it went back in her luscious mouth. He felt a cramp in his crotch.

“Certainly,” he finally responded.

“If you’d like to know more about Mark ... or me, just call me after seven – it’s when I get off. Well, actually, that might be later.” *Wowzers! Did she just say that?*

Chantelle then handed him a piece of blank register tape with her name and phone number written on it.

David put it in his wallet next to his debit card. *Some days you just can’t lose. My mega-lucky day! Put this one in a bottle for safe keeping.*

“Wow, sure.” David was smiling.

“When you call, what shall I call you?” Chantelle asked.

“Oh, sorry, my name is David. Nice meeting you. I’ll call you later.” *Damn straight I will. / Yeah, you better, sly boy.*

He then walked out to his white sedan with an almost triumphant swagger. A family, tourists to be sure, looked at him as he passed their SUV. He was bulging out of his indigo-blue gym shorts.

Chapter 28

Gerald couldn't stop thinking about that totaled, egg-white, formerly sunken, 2011 Ford Focus. Everything about it had been unique. He had never bought a car that had been completely submerged; he considered them monetary losers. As soon as he disclosed that such a car had been underwater – which was typically quite obvious – he knew that the potential sales would evaporate like shallow, stagnant, scummed-over swamp water on a hot southeastern North Carolina day. *Why did I buy it? Why the hell was I drawn to it?*

Gerald had bought numerous seriously smashed-up vehicles over the years – scores of end results of fatal collisions. “Deathmobiles,” he often called them; though, he wasn't the first one in the trade to use that coinage. This particular one, however, had arrested his attention. He mused further. *But, this driver went off the top of the Snow's Cut Bridge when apparently no one else was on it. The steering column linkages were intact; I checked them yesterday. Both front tires still had air in them when it was placed on the barge. I saw the photos. Was it a suicide? That's a very unusual way to off yourself. And yet, some guy from Raleigh – one hundred and thirty miles away – decides that he wants to buy the whole damn thing, even though all he needs is a trunk. And, all this occurs in less than a week. It's nuts! It's crazy! It's fishy ... as fishy as a streetwalker's twat.*

He had never had someone buy a whole wrecked car to be a part source for a car that was only one year old. He was not aware of 2011 Ford Focuses being collector's items, or becoming such any time soon; Gerald could not imagine this model being a future vintage, highly desired vehicle.

A fly that had entered earlier with Dale whizzed by Gerald's forehead. The junkyard owner watched the insect loop around the room until it disappeared. His rumination continued. *It's just a ho-hum, basic-transportation, average American sedan – a poor man's Honda. Really nothing more. But, this David guy most surely wants it. Does he anticipate getting into collisions involving only the right and rear sides of his car? There's something awfully strange about all of this – something I'm sorely missing.*

The fly then alighted on his desk. Splat! He nailed it with his rolled-up *Wilmington Star-News* newspaper. Gerald still had great eye-hand coordination.

He returned to his musing about the mysterious sedan. *This rental car was last driven by a guy who was estranged from his wife, but he goes to the same beach where she is staying, and they stay in separate motel rooms – even separate motels. Well, maybe he was spying on her. That's not unheard of when one spouse thinks the other is cheating, especially if one takes off for the beach alone. But, why does this guy fly off the Snow's Cut Bridge at five in the morning? Was he being chased? Were they both involved in some big drug deal? Did it all go wrong late in the night? Did someone – i.e., Mark – steal the drugs from Susan? Did Susan go down there to score a shitload of OxyContin? Were they all fucked-up and out of their gourds? I bet there are a lot of drugs in that car. Somewhere in that car. Susan overdosed on OxyContin. Maybe she had a case of it. Maybe David noticed the drugs in the car earlier this morning when he checked it out. Maybe the drugs are in air-tight plastic bags and still saleable. That's why David is willing to pay big bucks for that previously submerged*

Ford Focus. He recognized what the stuff is. He's a bio-tech guy. He's no idiot. That's got to be it. But, why didn't the Coast Guard or the police notice that. Why didn't they seize the drugs? They had to have searched the car. They had to have had a drug-sniffing dog go over that car. They had to have. The dog would've picked up the scent. No, I don't think that it's drugs. But, what? What did David see? Some valuable object, perhaps?

Gerald was correct with that drug-check thought. The New Hanover County Sheriff's Office had let a drug-sniffing canine crawl under the car and run through the car. The dog did her due diligence, sniffing under the seats, in the seats, in between the seats, the headliner, and behind the dashboard, and even sniffing the trunk and engine compartment – or what was left of it.

However, gold doesn't smell like marijuana, meth, heroin, opium, cocaine, crack or OxyContin. Gold is essentially odorless. The dog did her job satisfactorily. There were no drugs in the car. However, there was a nice bounty of gold. And, everyone had missed it until David lifted that spare tire up. And now Dale had it buried in his back yard.

There's something of high value in that car. I can feel it. With that line of thinking, Gerald got up and walked down to the wrecked Ford Focus. He opened the right-rear door and checked under the seats. All he felt was warm, moist carpet. The odor in the car was nearly toxic. *Whew! It reeks in here.*

Then he opened the right-front door and checked the glove compartment. There was nothing but wet literature from the

rental car company. He considered taking the dashboard off. *Wait, first let's check the trunk before we start dismantling.*

He lifted the trunk lever. The latch and linkage still worked. He walked over and looked inside. *Just rank carpet. Boy, it smells to high heavens in here! Ah, let's check under the spare tire.*

He removed the plastic piece, moved the black carpet piece aside, and unscrewed the wing nut. He then removed the black-steel-rimmed doughnut tire. *Well, nothing under there. Looks like I've struck out.*

But, just as he was about to put the spare tire back on the retaining bolt, he saw some yellow matter on the flat-black tire well of the trunk. *Hmmm, now what could this be? Was Mark in the sulfur business?* He chuckled to himself.

Gerald placed his right index finger down on the yellowish flakes; they stuck to his sweaty finger. The tiny wavy flakes were soft and very bendable. *Ah-ha! Inspector Zowen has cracked the case: There was gold hidden under this spare tire! Mark had gold fever so bad it killed him. But, who has it now? David must have seen it this morning when he examined the trunk. But, the gold is gone now. Actually, that rules out David. He wouldn't still be trying to buy this piece of junk if he already had the gold; he'd be long gone. He must still think that the gold is in here. That's why he wants to offer me that premium price for this demolished submarine-of-a-car. Dale must have got curious and checked the trunk after David left the lot. Dale must be the one who has it now. It's got to be him. That weasel took all of it, and didn't even tell me. What a loyal, trustworthy employee. I knew he was shit.*

Gerald heard a car pulling into the front parking lot. *It's probably David. This will be very telling. Just play dumb. Just hear him out.*

He quickly screwed the spare tire back down, replaced the plastic piece, and quietly closed the trunk and all four doors. Gerald hunched down and crawled back to the office the long way, hugging the back fence, staying shielded from David's roaming eyes.

Gerald kept four rows of wrecked vehicles between him and David. He then stood up once he was on the other side of the house-office, pausing to examine an artificially selected, 2008, rear-ended, blue-pearl Audi A4. *Hope he didn't see me. But even if he did, what is he going to do? What can he do?*

Gerald ambled up to the office on the other side of the front porch, making it seem like he was working on the other side of the main lot – not where the foremost Ford Focus was. The things that men will do for a couple of chunks of gold.

David was on the front porch waiting for him. "Hello, are you Gerald?" *That's got to be him.*

"Yes, that's me. Good to meet you." *So, there he is.*

They quickly shook hands. A dog barked.

"Likewise," David sputtered. *I wonder if he has checked the trunk. Gosh, I hope not.*

"So, you met my associate, Dale, earlier?"

"Yes, I did. I'm interested in buying the whole car. Did Dale tell you?"

“Yes, he did. He said that you are offering twelve hundred dollars. Are you sure you really want to pay all that money for that car? You know that it was underwater for some time. Even the good right-side door panels probably already have rust forming on the inside.” *The moment of truth has arrived. Let’s see how David plays this.*

David was puzzled and feeling uncertain about the current location of the gold. *Why is he trying to steer me out of buying the whole car? Has he seen the gold in the trunk? Has it been removed by one of them?*

Another dog bark.

“Nah, I think I will still take it,” David finally announced. The dogs then barked in unison. “But, can I just go out and look it over one more time?” *And please don’t follow or watch me.*

“Sure. Here are the keys.” Gerald handed David a basic silver ring with two keys. He gave his potential buyer a stony look. *This should be quite interesting. Very, very interesting. / Fingers crossed.*

David took the long walk out to the car. He looked back to see if Gerald could see him. There was no sign of him. *Great, the coast is clear, unless he’s up in that attic window. Well, time to check this trunk. C’mon, gold stash, be there!*

He popped open the trunk door. He noticed that the carpet had been moved slightly. *That’s a bad sign. A very bad sign. I’ve got a very bad feeling about this. This aint good.*

David pulled the carpet to the side, moved the plastic housing, and spun off the wing nut. He pulled the spare tire up to see ... Nothing! – nothing but black metal floorboard.

He stepped back, still looking at the vacated gold fillets' spot on the tire indentation in the floorboard, feeling completely deflated. *Mother sucker! They're gone! I knew I should've taken it this morning. I blew it. I fucking blew it! Goddamit! I gambled with time and lost. I waited too long. Why did I wait? I should've distracted that Dale dude earlier this morning and hauled off with the gold. I could be sitting in Raleigh right now with over a million dollars in gold! In my house! Instead, I'm in this nasty, insect-infested, hot-ass junkyard with nothing. Zilch. Nada. David, how in the world could you misplay this so badly? I'll be haunted by this for the rest of my life. How did I let this happen? I got overcautious, hesitated, tipped my hand, and lost. I lost out bigtime! Dumb, David. Very fucking dumb!*

David slammed the trunk door shut. He looked up at the fair-weather cumulus clouds. The air was as hot as a blast furnace, but there was no gold ore for the infernal sun to smelt.

He looked down at some aphid-covered weeds and started analyzing the less-than-ideal situation. *Maybe this isn't over. It's a safe bet that only one of two people has the gold: Dale or Gerald. Wait, maybe they cut a deal together. No, Dale would want it all and wouldn't tell Gerald. Dale's not the sharing type. It was his chance to best his boss and happily move away. I think I can safely rule out Gerald; he just arrived within the hour. But, why does Gerald not want me to buy the whole car for that inflated price? Why? Because he knows something is up. Dale's behavior or what he said must have got his suspicion up. He knows that I saw something of high*

value in that car, and he will soon know that I know that it is now gone when I rescind my offer.

A ladybug was now crawling up the weed stalk, heading towards a couple of aphids. I wonder if they can share this weed. Will they go to war over it? Will one of them have to die?

David turned and looked at the attic window. I bet Dale was watching me the whole time. He probably saw me gawking at something in the trunk. He was up there on the porch looking at me. And when he wasn't on the porch, he was probably observing me from some secret vantage point – that dark-tinted attic window. Maybe Dale acted odd or nervous when Gerald asked him about me and the trunk door. Maybe that was the tip-off for Gerald. Hell, Gerald's probably watching me right now. I may even be on camera. Maybe Dale watched me discover the gold from some hidden camera. What a major fucking blunder! It was right there. Right there. You had it in your hands, David! It was right in your very hands! You blew it, boy! You most astonishingly blew it. What a life-haunting blunder this will be.

David looked back towards the house-office, trying to settle his heart rate. Yeah, Gerald's probably observing me right now from that darkened attic window. Gosh, it's so damn dark; it's practically opaque black. It's their main surveillance perch. Has to be. Why else would it be tinted? Yep, I'm sure that's where they watch people on this side of the junkyard. I bet Dale got curious. When I left, I bet he ran down here and checked out the trunk. Voilà! We have a winner! He then put the gold in his vehicle and hauled it away. It's probably in his

vehicle or in his house right now. I need to figure out where he lives. I need Dale's last name.

David walked back to the house-office, trying to hide his dejection. He wasn't sure if he was succeeding. He entered the living room-office and took a seat on the couch. Gerald was still in the desk chair. *I wonder if he was really sitting there the whole time. I sincerely doubt it.*

"I think I'll just buy the trunk door, Gerald." *A most interesting change of mind.*

"What happened, David? Did you see some rust inside the trunk? Or, was it Jimmy Hoffa?" Gerald peered over the green banker's lamp and gave him a contrived grin.

"No, nothing like that. I just need to be practical. Money's tight. All I really need is that trunk door." David thought that he sounded believable.

"How much are you willing to pay?" Gerald inquired with a roll of the eyes. *Well, now we both know that we're just going through the motions.*

"How about one-fifty if you remove it for me. I forgot to bring my tools." *That's quite a lowball offer, and he knows it, but I'll accept it just to get his ass out of here.*

"Deal. You got it, buddy. I'll go out there now and take it off. You can cool your heels in here. It should only take fifteen minutes, tops. Just relax. You've driven a long way." *For nothing! Nothing but mental trauma of epic proportions.*

“Ok, thanks,” David replied, trying to mask his crestfallen state of mind. *At least I’ve scored a replacement trunk door – my consolation prize. Hell, he should give it to me for free. Well, I’ve still got a hot date later with Chantelle. Unless she cancels. Dammit, this is not over. Stay positive. Be smart. C’mon, David, outwit these fools.*

David looked out the window behind the desk. He watched Gerald disappear into the rows of wrecked motor vehicles, carrying just a small, red, top-handled toolbox. *I wonder how much Gerald knows. I’d love to be able to read his thoughts. What a mind game this is.*

David scanned the top of the desk. He saw a salvage title, several automobile registration cards, some insurance papers, and a stack of unopened mail – all bills.

Then in the right-front corner under a white McDonald’s bag, he saw two card holders. There were over a dozen dusty, stained, yellowing-from-age business cards in each holder for both men: Gerald Zowen and Dale Smite. *Ah, perfect! Maybe my luck is changing for the better. Hell, it couldn’t have gotten any worse. Time to rebound and make a clever comeback.*

He snagged two of each. Then he put the fast-food paper bag back where it had been.

David then examined the contents of the trashcan. The only items in it were an empty package of strawberry-flavored bubble gum, red clumps of the already-been-chewed gum, a banana peel, a crumpled Mountain Zoo soft-drink can, and a wadded-up piece of paper. He un-wadded the piece of notepaper and read Dale’s message that he had posted on

the door earlier. *So, Mr. Opportunistic hauled the gold over to his house shortly after I left this morning. The gold is somewhere on Dale's property, I bet. I just know it is.*

Gerald returned in only thirteen minutes with trunk door in hand. David gave him eight twenty-dollar bills.

"You can keep the extra," David said.

"Why, thank you, sir," Gerald said while exhaling. *"It's been a pleasure doing business with you." Yeah, I bet it has. How often does a customer tip you off to a million-dollar jackpot that was on your own premises, and is now in your associate's possession? He's just way too cool acting. He knows about the gold. I'm sure of it. Though, I'm not sure that he knows how much there is, but Dale sure does. I would still bet the farm that Dale has all of it at his house. In which room?*

"I hope that Ford Focus turns out to be a real financial winner for you, Gerald," David proclaimed after a tense pause. *A little parting jab for ya, Gerald. / What a smug smart-ass.*

"Oh, I think it already has, David." *Well, that cinches it.*

David caught Gerald's eye. The three-second staredown was almost input overload for each man's brain, as both of them were fast-processing the nuances of each other's expression. White smoke was almost coming out of their ears. *Gerald is content with how this has gone down; he got the information he needed by my actions and statements. But, I got good info, too. He's planning something. I can feel it in his eyes. He'd give me that trunk door for free just to get me the hell off his lot. He'll be having a talk with Dale very soon. I'm sure of it. / I almost feel sorry for this techie. Almost. Enjoy the drive back*

to Raleigh, David. Close, but no cigar, amigo. Wait, will he really go back to Raleigh? Will he be hanging around? Maybe so. Must stay cautious. He may be scheming already.

“Well, I guess I’ll be heading back now.” I wonder if Gerald believes me. / Good riddance, millennial. Get the fuck lost! I got what I needed from you, tech-boy. Now, don’t let the front gate hit your rear bumper.

“Ok, I’ll put that trunk door in your trunk. Hey, in all my time in this business, I don’t think I’ve ever said that.” Gerald chuckled somewhat awkwardly. Hasta la vista, David. I got business to attend to with my dishonest associate. Happy travels and sappy travails. / So amusing. Not!

David just smiled at him. We’re both total fucking liars, and we both know it. David looked at his car. “Let me get the trunk open for you, Gerald.”

He got in his car and pulled the trunk-release lever. The dented trunk door popped open. Gerald placed the salvaged trunk door inside the like-new-empty trunk and closed the dinged-to-hell trunk door.

David then started the engine, backed up, and drove off, never looking at Gerald. What a weirdly and utterly dispiriting half-hour that was. But, it’s not over. Not by a longshot. / Must keep my wits about me. David may be lurking.

Gerald watched David’s car until it disappeared on Shipyard Boulevard. I hope that’s the last I see of him. Dale will be much easier to deal with. I’m going to squeeze him for the new location of that gold. The vise man is coming, Dale! I’m going

to get you to cough it up, one way or another. I'm going to get that gold from you, you good-for-nothing thief!

Chapter 29

Dale was sitting at his large, round, oak kitchen table, eating a bowl of Manhattan-style clam chowder soup for lunch when his cell phone rang. It was Gerald. He accidentally knocked over the dill-weed spice bottle while answering the call.

"Hello Dale." *It's showtime! Buckle up. Here we go.*

"Hello boss. How did it go with David? Did he buy the whole car for a nice price?" *Remember, play dumb. / Yeah, right.*

"No, he only bought the trunk door." *Imagine that.*

"Oh, wow. What could have changed his mind, boss?" Dale was testing the waters. Gerald was already enraged. *The removal of the gold from trunk, you coy fucking asshole!*

"Maybe something was missing," Gerald sternly announced. Dale could hear Gerald's teeth gnashing. *Oh, boy.*

"One sec, boss. The water on the stove is boiling." *Oh, shit! Did David tell him that there was gold in that trunk five hours ago? No, he's not that stupid. That would be a no-winner for him. Well, maybe Gerald would give him a reward for being honest. But, would he really believe him? I doubt it. I bet that David still has designs on trying to get all of the gold for himself. I've obviously still got to watch out for him. Wait, did Gerald know that there was gold in the trunk before David arrived? That makes no sense, either. If he knew that there was gold in that wrecked car's trunk, he never would've entertained a possible sale of the whole car. Heck, Gerald would have removed that gold long before David discovered it. He wouldn't have left it in there for more than an hour. And,*

no way would he let those gold nuggets sit in there overnight on that lot. Even with the dogs, he loses car parts monthly to nighttime thieves. No, Gerald must just sense that something of high value was in the trunk.

After a long, uneasy pause, Dale muttered, "Maybe so." Ok, here we go. / Maybe? The worthless lying mother-fucker!

"I think that you know what was missing, Dale. You took it, didn't you?" How in the world does he know that I took the gold out of the trunk? How? Did David really come clean and tell Gerald that there was a shitload of gold in the trunk of that white Ford Focus, and that's why he wanted to buy the whole car? Would David really tell Gerald that? I just can't imagine him doing that. No way.

"Took what?" So, the moment of truth has arrived.

"The fucking GOLD, you bastard! How much was there? Stop lying to me, you fucking thief!" Gerald was shouting with an incendiary rage. Oh my God, David did tell him! They're both working against me now as a team. I guess they plan to split it if they ever get their greedy hands on it. Good luck with that, fellas. Neither one of you will ever find it. But, why is he asking me 'how much'? Did David not give him an estimate? Maybe Gerald does not trust the amount that David told him.

Dale tried to recompose himself. "Gold? There was gold in that white Ford Focus? You must be kidding me, boss." Dale stammered out the syllables, trying his best to sound like he was shocked and completely oblivious to the whole scenario. That dumb-ass is just playing dumb. I'll show him.

“Stop it! Just freaking stop it! Stop it right now! Stop lying to me, Dale, and start listening to me. Listen closely to me. I know that the value of the gold must be at least ten thousand dollars. And that’s the rock-bottom minimum. My guess is that its worth is over fifty thousand dollars, maybe considerably more by the way David was acting, and by the way you are acting right now!” *Ah, so David didn’t tell him how much gold was in that trunk; he didn’t even give him a ballpark figure. That’s kind of strange. Gerald really has no idea that the gold’s value is over a million dollars.*

“Ok, I’m listening, boss.” *I could care less what he says.*

Gerald continued. “Listen, Dale, we can split it. You can have sixty percent.” *He wants to cut a deal with me? A three-way deal, including David? He’ll take just twenty percent? Totally bizarre. And totally unbelievable. This is confusing as hell. But, ultimately, it doesn’t matter. Just meaningless spoken words. / He better wise up and do what I say.*

“How much of a cut will you and David get?” *Let’s just play along and see what he divulges.*

“David will get nothing! Not a fucking dime!” *What?! Nothing for David? Such loyalty and sharing among thieves. / How stupid is he? Why should I give David anything?*

“Will David come after us, boss?” Dale asked, feigning interest in Gerald’s proposal. *If he does, I’ll frame you, Dale.*

“Hell no. He’s out of the picture now.” *Did Gerald already kill David and hide his body? Buried under a wrecked car?*

“Oh, really?” *Just hear his ludicrous plan out.*

“Listen, listen, listen. I can get it sold for us. I know the right people; you don’t. You’ll get questioned and busted trying to sell it.” *Bullshit, boss!*

“Oh.”

“Listen to me, Dale, and listen closely. With me, you’ll get clean, crisp, untraceable cash.” *And a bullet in the back of my head.*

“Ok ...”

“You’ll have no worries. None whatsoever.” *Yeah, right, boss. I’m just so sure that I can trust you.*

Dale tried to audibly mask his complete non-interest in Gerald’s proposal. He continued to play along. “Boss, are you sure about that? It sounds so risky. I don’t want you to go to jail. Do you really trust these people? How well do you know them?” *Just stop already, you idiot.*

“Listen, please fucking listen to me. I will take the goddam risk. All of it. I know how to do this. Don’t worry about me.” *Believe me, I wasn’t.*

Dale paused for a moment. *I need to throw him a test question – something that will elicit an answer indicating if he knows the type of gold I have.* He coughed and then asked his ingenious ruse-of-a-question:

“Boss, can they buy all twelve gold class rings at one time?”

“I found gold flakes in the trunk underneath the spare tire. I know it’s not a dozen fourteen-carat class rings, you fucking wiseacre!” *Ah-ha! Muchas gracias for that information,*

Gerald. You have no idea of how much gold I have, nor do you know the shape or form of it ... and you never will, boss-ass.

Dale hung up the phone. He had got what he wanted. And Gerald did, too, to a lesser degree.

Chapter 30

David drove into historic downtown Wilmington. The area had really become a desirable place to live over the past couple of decades. Most of the century-old houses had now been refurbished. The large, mature, deciduous trees shaded the yards and streets, providing some relief from the scorching sun.

David was heading north on Front Street, his mind momentarily lost in the greenery. After crossing Orange Street, he saw a sign for The Stammering Man Inn on his right. *This B&B should do the trick. Most everything is walkable from here. Maybe I can come up with a good strategy here.*

He pulled in and parked. It was 2:43 PM. He got a nice room with a large soft bed. He laid his fatigued body down and was out for nearly two hours. The nap eased some of his golden frustration. His mind felt recharged when he awoke. *I need a new plan. Remove your dunce cap and put on your thinking cap, numbskull. We can still do this. Think! Think up a new stratagem. You're not battling rocket scientists.*

However, David's mind drifted back to Chantelle. He pulled the register tape paper out of his wallet. *I wonder if the number she gave me is a cell phone or land line. It's got to be a cell number. Does anyone I know even have a land line?*

He glanced out the street-side window. An orange-shirted cyclist sped by. *Did I see that guy somewhere else today?*

He then began composing a text to Chantelle. *Jeez, what should I say? I don't want to give away too much information*

at first. Who knows who may see it? I'll just assume that she has a boyfriend. I'll keep it generic and prosaic. He typed:

Looking forward to your suggestions.

He mashed the Send key. *Who knows? Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Maybe I can even use her in my ploy to recover that gold.*

David didn't have to wait long for a reply. Four minutes later he received her text:

I want to taste one of those condoms.

Wowzeroni! Ok, I already know how this night will end.

He was already popping a rod. *Down, boy. Not yet.*

Three and a half minutes later, David returned fire with:

Want to have dinner first?

Just a minute later his cell phone was chirping with Chantelle's answer:

Sure! Where?

This seems to be going too good. I hope she doesn't turn out to be like the gold in that trunk at crunch time: nowhere to be found.

David hunted and pecked his reply:

We can start at my hotel. I'm at The
Stammering Man Inn on Front Street
in downtown Wilmington. After you
pass Orange Street, it's on the right.
See you at 7:30?

Ten minutes went by with no return text from Chantelle. At the fifteen-minute mark, his head was whirling in a world of doubt. *Was my cologne that bad? Did my deodorant fail so completely in this sauna-like heat? Can she still smell my ripeness from ten miles away? Or, maybe she got cold feet. Maybe she just likes the thrill of the fantasy. It's understandable. A young lady has to be careful in this day and age. Hell, I could be some rapist-killer for all she knows.*

But then, 17 minutes and 17 seconds later, her reply came in:

Sure! I'll see you then and there.
Oh, sorry for the delay. I had a rush.

The girl's got game. She's got spunk. She's daring. She'll be perfect. Damn, I forgot that she is actually at a cash register, ringing up customers. I'm lucky that I got any text responses from her at all. That is one busy Wally World in the summer, overrun by beach tourists. Myself, excepted, of course. He chuckled.

David composed his final text to Chantelle in this initial exchange and sent it. It read:

No problem, Chantelle. This should
be an unforgettable, magical night.

No reply came back. He just assumed that she was busy at work with a long line. And when he re-read his last text, he realized that it didn't prompt a return volley.

David propped some of the frilly throw pillows under his arms and flipped on his laptop computer. He was able to pick up the inn's wireless signal. Yes!

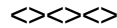
He immediately went to Google and ran a search on the keywords: Dale Smite, Wilmington, New Hanover County, NC. He saw a green lizard watching him from the exterior window sill.

Three hits came back. One guy lived at Wrightsville Beach. *That's not him. That real estate's way too expensive for him.*

Another guy lived in Castle Hayne. *No, that's way too far away. The note said that he could be back in just fifteen minutes. He must live within two miles of the junkyard.*

The third Dale Smite lived at 2393 Van Buren Street in Sunset Park. He entered the address on Google maps. *That's him! Got ya, pal! Game on! Van Buren Street? What are the chances? Mark and Susan must be pulling and plucking the strings with the gods about now.*

David glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand. It was 5:18. *I've got time to drive by Dale's house. The drive will relax me and take some of the first-date edge off. Sure, let's drive down to the gold thief's abode. Just do a preliminary drive-by for now.*



David entered the century-old Sunset Park neighborhood via Northern Boulevard, noticing the twin old brick pergolas on opposite corners. *Were they bus stop shelters? Where did the roofs go? Did they rot away? Why am I even thinking about this?*

When he reached Van Buren, he turned left. *Well, Mark and Susan, I hope I'm on the golden street.* He slowly passed by the house with the black, plastic, 5-inch-tall numerals 2-3-9-3 on the tan, wooden, horizontal-slat siding. *Bingo!*

Two vehicles were in the driveway: Dale's burgundy minivan and Gerald's red Caddy. *The bastards are probably dividing up the spoils of their coup. Maybe I should charge in there. No, I'd just get shot. I'll give these two loons some more time to hang themselves. I'll get that gold back. Just need to stay smart. Stay cool. I just need to think clearly.*

When David was almost past the house, he tooted his horn. He saw the living room curtains move. Gerald was peering out. David winked at him, rounded the corner onto Southern Boulevard and sped away. *Hello, boys! I know where you are. What will you do now? Call the police? Come chase me? Shoot at me? Bring it. Let's get both of you in jail by sundown.*

David took Burnett Boulevard and South Front Street – the back way – to return to his lodgings. He checked his rear-view

mirror often. Neither of the two vehicles was following him. He made it back safely.

<><><>

He took a shower and prepared for Chantelle's arrival. He switched on the 6:00 local news. He missed the first few minutes; it was 6:03 PM.

A stylish, female, Asian American reporter was interviewing a large, black, profusely sweating lady on Van Buren Street at the house next-door to Dale's. There were three Wilmington Police Department cruisers and a New Hanover County ambulance behind her. *What the hell is going on? What happened? Did Gerald shoot Dale, or vice versa?*

"Ma'am, what did you hear?" the reporter asked.

"I heard three gunshots. Boom-boom-boom. I could tell it wasn't fireworks. No way. It was gunshots. I knew something bad had happened." The lady was emphatic.

"What time did you hear the gunshots?"

"It was probably about a quarter to six. Yeah, five forty-five. I remember looking at my watch." *Damn, I just missed it. Did my drive-by provoke it? Which one got shot? Has the other one been arrested?*

"Did you know this neighbor?" *Did? Past tense? What the fuck! Did Gerald really kill Dale?*

"I didn't really know him. I just know that his wife died a couple of years ago. He kept to himself." *Wow, Dale is dead. Gerald killed him. What a malicious asshole!*

"Thanks for your time, ma'am," the reporter said as she closed the interview.

The white, middle-aged, gray-haired, male news anchor then asked the reporter a question: "Cindy, has the murder suspect been arrested?"

"No, Stephen, the suspect is at-large." *So, Gerald's on the run.*

"Do they have a description of the suspect?"

"Yes, they do. He's Caucasian, in his late 50s, of average build, around six-feet tall, with fading-brown-to-gray, collar-length hair. Wait just a second, Stephen; I'm getting some more information from the police."

A dark-uniformed city police officer hands Cindy a note card. She nods to him. She then looks back at the camera.

"His name is Gerald Zowen. He was last seen driving a red, 1976, Cadillac – the Sedan de Ville model. The victim's name is Dale Smite. He lived in the house behind me, which is 2393 Van Buren Street. He was pronounced dead by the paramedics before being placed in the ambulance." *I'll make sure you do time, douchebag. We all want that gold, but it belongs to none of us. Try to outsmart the guy who has it,*

dipshit; don't shoot him. At least not at his home. Killing someone with a handgun – without a silencer – in their own house with your own registered vehicle in the guy's driveway, in broad daylight, while kids were out playing in the street, while neighbors were out doing yard work ... Dumb, incredibly dumb, dude. You just lost the gold game. You deserve to suck on the hydrogen cyanide gas pipe.

The anchorman was back on the TV screen. "Thanks for that on-the-scene report, Cindy. Folks, if you see the suspect's vehicle, call 911. Don't try to intervene yourself. This individual is armed and dangerous. Let the police handle it. Any further developments will be brought to you as soon as they occur. We'll be the first to tell you. So, keep it right here on Channel 8 News."

A commercial came on, and David began to mindlessly channel surf while thinking about the events of the past half-hour. *So, Gerald killed Dale in cold blood. Three shots. Bang-bang-bang. Probably at close range. Probably head shots. Probably in a fit of rage. Did my drive-by and horn-toot quickly set off a fatal chain of events? Did it signal something in Gerald's mind? Did he think that Dale and I were working as a team? That I somehow hoodwinked him at the salvage yard? I bet Dale was being interrogated at gunpoint by Gerald. And, I bet Dale wasn't talking. That's why he was still there at five forty-five. He probably rushed over to Dale's house right after I left the lot. He had probably been questioning him with a revolver in his face for over three hours. I'm sure Dale was playing dumb. He didn't believe that Gerald would really give him most, half, or any of the gold once he had it in his*

possession. He would take all of it and kill him. He wasn't going to share it with anyone. Dale was going to lose either way. Dale knew he was in a desperate situation. He was probably just hoping that someone would come to the house and ring the doorbell. A knock on the door to change the dynamics in that living room. Maybe Gerald told him that he would keep him under house arrest all night if need be. He would get his captured canary to sing. He was starting to wear Dale down, I bet. He was using street-smart hardball psychology that only a veteran junkyard owner could know and employ. He had probably threatened to turn Dale over to the police for some bogus trumped-up reason if he didn't spill the beans on the gold's exact location. I bet that was what was going on. Enhanced interrogation. Gerald probably wasn't up to waterboarding him just yet. But, did Dale crack just before Gerald shot him? Did he tell Gerald where he hid the gold? Did Gerald then gather up the gold fillets, put them in his truck and leave? But, if he shot Dale right after he talked, the neighbors would have seen him going to his truck with a box, crate or some other container. Hey, I could ask some of the neighbor-witnesses if Gerald left the house with anything in his hands. They would know if he left with those golden boomerangs. I must interview them before their memory fades. Wait, I'm not the one to interview them – Cindy Santos, the news reporter – she's the one to interview them. I'll e-mail a tip to her.

David flipped back to channel 8. The sportscaster was extremely animated, flapping his arms about in his red-stripes-on-black blazer. "Can you believe that bogus call, folks? The umpire called him out! Wilmington would've won

that game in the bottom of the 11th if we could've got a fair call." David turned the volume down, way down.

He entered Channel 8's URL and looked over their website. In the Contact section he found Cindy Santos' e-mail address. *Wow, should I really do this? I could easily end up getting questioned by the police. So, what? What have I done wrong? Nothing. Nada. Have I done anything illegal? No. This is my chance to confirm that over a million dollars in gold is still on Dale's property, either in his house, in the shed, or buried in the yard somewhere. It's time to go bold or go home.*

David clicked on the hotlink and began to compose a brief tip for the reporter.

Hello Cindy,
I just saw your report on the 6:00 PM broadcast regarding the apparent murder on Van Buren Street. Excellent work. However, you may want to go back and ask those witnesses whether or not they saw the suspect, Gerald Zowen, putting a box, sack, or large container into his Cadillac. I think this murder was over money. Stolen cash, perhaps. I say this because I was at Gerald's Shipyard Boulevard Auto Salvage earlier today. I bought a car part from him. He was complaining furiously about how he was sure that his assistant, Dale Smite, had ripped him off. He kept saying that a very

large *wad of cash* was missing from the safe, and that he was going to get even with whomever took it, and that Dale was his prime suspect. Well, just thought that I would pass this along to you. Maybe you can use this tip to get an exclusive. I hope so. Continued success.

All the best,
David

He actually hoped he would get to meet her someday. She was cute and smart. She could play an important part; her investigative skills and tools could surely and sorely be used in the near future.

David clicked Send. It was gone, launched one-way into the great cyber-ether. *What have I done? Have I lost my mind? I'm now involved in a murder investigation. That's fine. I'm totally innocent. But, I've lied about the lead-up to the murder. Well, not really. Cash is what we all hope to convert the gold into at some point. But, it wasn't Gerald's or anyone else's. The e-mail makes Dale look like maybe he deserved to get plugged; it insinuates that he was a thief. Well, he was no angel, either. He's dead now, anyway. His mouth has stopped moving. As for Gerald, he deserves to swing from a hemp rope necklace under a tall oak tree. Just keep your mettle, boy. Stay steady. You can surely answer fifteen minutes of benign police questions in return for a million dollars of golden information.*

He flipped to the channel that showed the channel line-up with all the shows that were currently on or soon to air. The audio for the channel was light mood music. Sarah Vaughan was singing the Mancini classic, *A Slow Hot Wind*. "... there in the shade ..." *Yes, there in the shade ... somewhere is the gold. Lying. Waiting. For me.*

David changed the TV station back to channel 8. It was 6:28. Cindy Santos was back on the screen. She was still on Van Buren Street, standing in front of Dale's house. A *Breaking News* banner was being projected on the top of the screen, just above her long, straight, jet-black hair.

"We have just learned that the suspect in this homicide, Gerald Zowen, has been taken into custody. Police barricaded his car in a parking lot near Market Street and Kerr Avenue several minutes ago. No one was hurt during the arrest." Cindy Santos announced the update like a seasoned pro. *Hooray, they've already got the lousy son of a bitch! Didn't quite go as planned, did it, Gerald? You'll have plenty of time to think about your misplay. Lotsa time. You can play tic-tac-toe on the concrete walls in your six-by-eight cell. One fine day, which may be very soon, you'll place an X in both upper corners and an O in the middle square, and you'll be an incarcerated artist looking at your self-portrait.*

He went to the small refrigerator and grabbed an El Hefe, a seasonal beer from Front Street Brewery. *I hope she likes these.*

David then closely studied the beer bottle's label. *Wow, this is über-kitsch! These microbreweries sure have got some imagination. I guess you need it when you're trying to get some shelf space in a cooler dominated by the big dogs.*

He sat back in the armchair and watched the national news. *Jeez, when did Peter Jennings die? What year was that? 2007? Or, was it 2006? [It was 2005.]*

He heard a faint bell sound. His laptop had received an e-mail. *Has Cindy already replied to my non-anonymous tip? I wonder if she checked me out on Facebook.* David had already checked out Cindy's page, and had noticed that she was single.

While making his way over to the bed to retrieve the laptop, another train of thought entered his head. *What if it's the police? What if they want to question me right away? What if they want to know where I am? What will I tell Chantelle?*

He grabbed the laptop and walked back to the armchair with considerable trepidation. He clicked on Inbox. *Whew!* He breathed a big sigh of relief. The e-mail was from Cindy.

Hi David,
Thanks for the tip and the compliment.
None of the witnesses saw Gerald
Zowen leave Dale Smite's house with
anything in his hands.
Still very busy with this story.
Thanks,

Cindy Santos
Channel 8 News

He read her brief e-mail another time. And then another. *The gold is somewhere on that lot – somewhere on that eighth-of-an-acre parcel. I can feel it; it's there. It may be in the house. It may be in the shed. It may be buried in that loamy sand. I really doubt that it's still in Dale's car. However, I need to be able to rule it out. How can I – or someone else – search Dale's car? Hell, the police have probably already searched it, or soon will. It's probably already impounded. How could I find out the results? Would Cindy know? Probably. Couldn't I just ask her if anything of consequence was found in either vehicle? I could wait until tomorrow before e-mailing her again. I don't want to appear like 'that' guy who always thinks he's a master detective after every crime story is presented on TV. These reporters must get barraged with useless tips and false leads for scoops. If I wait until tomorrow, say about lunch time, the police would've gone through Gerald's Cadillac, too. That's when I could ask Cindy about both cars' contents. We'll just sleep on it tonight.*

David looked at the digital clock on the nightstand. The red LED numerals asserted 6:59. *Chantelle's getting off work about now. I bet her thing is something else. Calm down, boy!*

He walked over to the dresser and found the pack of chocolate-flavored condoms in the plastic grocery bag. He opened the box and placed two condoms under the right pillow and one in his left-front pants pocket. *All prepared for tunneling operations. When I put one of these on, she may*

very well think I'm her black ex-boyfriend. Well, except for the length. Ha!

He actually laughed aloud.

Chapter 31

Cindy Santos was the older of two sisters. She had one brother, the youngest of the siblings. Her parents were both Filipino from Metro Manila. Her mother was a nurse from Antipolo, the town with the great Manila Bay view and a slightly cooler climate. Her dad was from Pasay City, very close to the international airport. He was a jet-engine mechanic. They met on the LRT, the above-ground, mass-transit rail line, on its opening day in 1984.

Her parents immigrated to the United States when she was only three years old. They took up residence on the Central California coast, just south of San Francisco. Franciscan Park, a mobile-home community in Daly City, or Little Manila, as many now call it, was where they took root. It was a good fit, as Daly City soon became California's (and America's) first majority-Filipino city. However, Daly City sat atop the infamous San Andreas Fault.

The mobile-home park was on the southwestern flank of San Bruno Mountain. This was no ratty trailer park; the homes and grounds were meticulously well-kept. Its biggest allure: stunning, multi-million-dollar Pacific Ocean views – when the fog broke – for a budget price (by California standards).

Many bus routes were just down the mountain on El Camino Real. There was also a BART station close by. The family lived easily without a car the first five years.

Cindy excelled in school. She loved the English language. She also loved to spice it up with Tagalog-English blends. Taglish, she and her friends called it.

She graduated from Jefferson High School in 2005. She then went to San Francisco State University on a partial scholarship and got a degree in Broadcast and Electronic Communication. After graduation she found no luck in landing a job with a Bay Area TV station, as each station had stacks of résumés, and added another pile each week.

Cindy grew tired of waiting for a local bite. She was ready to begin her career. She decided to cast her line much farther and wider; her job search went nationwide.

When she first got word that a TV station in Wilmington was interested in her, she failed to look at the state. She assumed it was Wilmington, California – the port of Los Angeles. She later saw the letters NC after Wilmington.

She researched Wilmington, North Carolina. It seemed kind of charming. She would be three thousand miles from her parents and siblings, but she wanted to show them that she could do it. She had a strong independent spirit. *Ah, what the heck. I'm young. It's not permanent. If I fall on my face, I can always come back home. If nothing else, it'll get my résumé started. I may even like it enough to stay. Hey girl, let's go for it! You only live once.*

She began doing random field reporting for Channel 8's 6:00 PM and 11:00 PM newscasts. She felt confident and

comfortable doing it. She was a natural in front of the camera with a microphone in her hand.

As the only Asian female on the local TV news stations, she got lots of fan mail from the Asian freaks – men and women. She loved the attention, except the handwritten letters from the ones who seemed like genuine psychopaths. They scared the hell out of her. She soon had someone screening her mail.

After two years of living in a quaint yet cramped apartment on Nun Street, she decided to drop anchor and buy a condo. She found a nice one-bedroom unit on Water Street with a great view of the Cape Fear River. The sunsets were majestically postcard-perfect five nights a week. The World War II battleship that fought in Leyte Gulf in the Philippines was right across the river from her second-floor, picture window. Moreover, she loved her new digs.

She was also right in the middle of the Wilmington nightlife scene. The boutiques, restaurants, bars and coffee shops were all short walks. It wasn't long before she had a boyfriend.

John was his name. He was a mustachioed, white guy of thirty-two years from Boise, Idaho, who was an insurance agent. He was not a bad bald guy. It was the first time she had sex with a man. Their relationship, though, only lasted six months. It just fizzled out. There was no dramatic ending.

Back in college, a Filipina friend had talked her into a lesbian experiment one night after they ate some green brownies. They were high as untethered kites. She didn't hate it, but it

made her realize that she wanted a real wienie in her *bilat* (a Filipino term for vagina).

The weekend weatherman at the TV station was constantly flirting with her, but she thought that he was a bisexual swinger, who would never stay faithful and moored to just one female. She laughed at his odd jokes, just to be polite. He had asked her to go out with a group of friends several times, but she always had an excuse for not going. She knew the inherent risks of being in certain public places. Cindy was always afraid that some bigwig in Wilmington would see her out drinking and acting silly, and that it would have a detrimental effect on her career. She was very conscious of her public image, whether on or off the clock.

However, loneliness had found her and was beginning to suffocate her. She considered posting an online singles ad under an alias. She spent three hours one night writing a detailed description about herself sans photo. And promptly deleted it. She just couldn't do it.

Chapter 32

Chantelle knocked on David's inn door at 7:33 PM. He opened the door. She was simply stunning in her purple summer dress with swirly paisley patterns. It hung on her slender body so perfectly; it wasn't too tight, nor too loose.

"Hello there, and don't you look so gorgeous," David proclaimed with a big smile.

"Why, thank you. You don't look like chopped liver, either," Chantelle added. *I wonder where she heard that.*

"Ah, you already know some American expressions."

"You hear a lot of idiomatic English in those checkout lines, my darling." *My darling? Already? Wow!*

"Oh, I bet that you hear a lot of things, and see a lot of checking-you-out." David chuckled. "Well, here, have a seat." David motioned for her to sit in the armchair. He then sat on the side of the bed, facing her.

"This is a nice room," she remarked while looking at the textured walls.

"Yeah, it is. I got it because it's close to everything down here. Walking distance, in fact. No need to drive the car anywhere. I don't like driving after I've been drinking, not even after one beer. Just too risky. The alcohol odor. I just don't want the hassle at an impromptu roadblock." *Impromptu roadblock?*

"That's smart," Chantelle said. *He's a bit paranoid, I do believe.*

"Where would you like to eat, Chantelle? Any type of cuisine in mind?"

"Pizza! Just kidding. How about some seafood?"

"Sounds like a winner. Port cities always have the best seafood. There's a place just around the corner with a nice river view."

David looked at her breasts and imagined what would be happening in the room two hours from now. He had sprouted a bent oozing chub. *Wish I could turn that damn thing off.*

"Cool! Ready to go?" Chantelle was full of energy. *I wonder how big his biroute [penis in French] is.*

"Sure," David said as he rose from his sitting position on the bed with some difficulty. "Let's head over to Chandler's Wharf and see what's popping?" *Huh?*

"See what's popping?" Chantelle gave him an inquisitive look. "I don't think that I've heard that expression before." She was now grinning.

"I hadn't heard it before, either," David said as he opened the door for them to exit. *He's as odd as Mark.*



They were able to get a table with a view of the tea-colored Cape Fear River. A lone tugboat was headed downstream towards the port. The gray, steel-truss Memorial Bridge towered to their left. The burnt-orange sun was steadily approaching the horizon. The shadows were lengthening on the water's undulating surface. *Wow, it looks just like a postcard. I think he really likes me. / She seems content. This is going great.*

David began the dinner conversation as he turned his gaze to Chantelle's mysterious dark eyes. He just hoped that he wouldn't stutter. *Just relax. Go with a comedic ice-breaker.*

"Chantelle, tell me about yourself. What do you do besides flirt with guys in the Wally World checkout line?" David gave her an overconfident smirk, replete with a right-eye wink.

"I don't flirt with every guy that passes through my line." She was somewhat taken aback by David's opening salvo, but quickly recovered and got back on her game. "I only flirt with the ones that look like they are up to something big, like you and Mark." She winked back at him.

"Excuse me, but I think the air went out of my big balloon earlier this afternoon," David confessed.

"Well, maybe I can pump it back up later tonight." *Wow! No persuading needed with her. This is going to be deliciously easy. I guess the gods are not totally against me.*

"I'm sure you can, sexy lady. But, before we get back there, what can you tell me about Mark?"

"Well, not much more than I told you in the store. Our whole conversation only lasted a minute. He seemed to be in quite a rush. He appeared to have something urgent to do."

"I see. And, you wanted to be with him?" *My boy is tripping.*

David wanted a straight answer from Chantelle, but doubted he would get one. He tapped his left index finger unconsciously on the fork.

"No, I just wanted to know more about him. I just had this sixth-sense feeling that he was up to something – something big. Maybe he was on some kind of mission." *A golden mission, no less.*

"Why did you want to know more about him? Might you be a journalism student at UNCW, [University of North Carolina at Wilmington] Chantelle?"

"No, David, I'm a creative-writing student at Cape Fear Community College. I hope to transfer to UNCW next year. I'm always looking for more material for my future novel." *Novel?*

"Oh, a budding, sexy writer. Even more dangerous than a reporter. Novels have a long shelf-life." *That was kind of clever. He's not all zeroes and ones.*

David had got Chantelle to laugh. They were both immensely enjoying the evening. Their minds were churning up future scenarios. *He'll be a good male character study. I wonder if he can really pump it. Really hit it hard. / Well, I got her to laugh. I'll get her to scream later. I can already feel those long, exotically painted fingernails clawing into my back. Oh, yeah!*

The waiter arrived. He was white, of average build with black hair, in his mid-20s, and kind of Italian looking. His long, white, flapping apron brushed against Chantelle's water glass, nearly snagging and toppling it.

"Woah, that was a close call," the waiter said as he steadied Chantelle's water glass. "Are you guys ready to order?"

"What would you like, Chantelle?" David asked.

"Oh, I'm not a big eater," Chantelle said. "Just a bowl of seafood soup will do for me."

"What kind of seafood soup, madam?" the waiter asked while pointing to the soup and salad section of the menu.

"Surprise me!" Chantelle exclaimed as she turned and smiled widely at David.

"And for you, sir?" the waiter asked.

"I'll have what she's having," David chimed back.

“Ok, so we’re doubling down on tonight’s mystery soups.” The waiter quickly made the shorthand notations on his pad. “And, anything to drink other than water?” he asked, hoping for an expensive wine order.

“Do you like Moscato, Chantelle?” David asked. *Most women love this sweet wine.*

“I sure do,” Chantelle gleefully replied. *I knew it. / Does he really think that he needs to get me drunk first?*

“We’ll split a bottle of the golden Moldovan Moscato,” David told the waiter, as he scratched his right ear. *Moldova?*

“Very well. Good choice. Your soups should be out in five to seven minutes,” the waiter announced, and then walked away.

“Five to seven minutes, did you catch that, Chantelle?”

“I did. It’s those kinds of lines that will be in my novel. Some of the things I’ve overheard I could never make up. People say the oddest things sometimes.”

“Don’t you need to write it down? Is your memory that good?” David was quite curious as to how she would remember. *Does she use some association-based memorization technique?*

“Oh, I have my little, digital, audio recorder going,” Chantelle coolly disclosed. “It can record up to thirty-five minutes.”

“Well, I can go longer than that.” David chuckled. *I hope I can. I may bust in three minutes on that hot body. / He’ll shoot his first load in four minutes, tops.*

“Well, I certainly hope so.” Chantelle gave him a challenging look. “Ah, here comes our soup.”

They took a break from their scintillating dialogue and began to feast on their scrumptious seafood soups. Chantelle’s appeared to be mostly crab; David’s seemed to be mostly white fish with some bay clams sprinkled in.

The restaurant was nearly full now. The waiters were having to hustle. A pot dropped in the kitchen. <clang>

They both finished their soups at the same time. They were gastronomically satiated to the max.

“Boy, that really hit the spot, David.” *I hope that I hit her spot later. I want to create an orgasmic frenzy with this super-sexy, young woman.*

“Yeah, that was good stuff,” David replied as the waiter came with the wine bottle and glasses.

The waiter poured the wine into each glass until they were half full. He did so in an effeminate manner. “Enjoy,” he said as he left their table.

“Do you think our waiter is gay?” Chantelle curiously asked. *Of course, but why does she ask?*

"I believe so. His mannerisms remind me of one of my gay friends in Raleigh."

"My younger brother is gay," Chantelle blurted out. "He's having a hard time in high school. He'll have to go again next year. I think that he'll end up graduating when he's nineteen. I think it's harder when you're black. And, transferring from Haiti to America at the age of thirteen was tough for him. Do you have any gay relatives?"

"I do, Chantelle – a cousin and an uncle."

"Have you ever had a homosexual experience?" *Wow, right between the eyes.*

David tried to regain his poise. "Well, let's just say that there was one night in Bangkok," David said aloofly as he nervously chuckled.

"Please elaborate, sir," Chantelle demanded like a hostile lawyer in a TV-covered courtroom.

"Well, four of us – college buddies from Pitt – went to Bangkok one summer between my junior and senior year. Of course we went trolling for whores. I mean, what college-age male doesn't in that city of sex? Well, we were drunk and high on something that I can't even pronounce, and two of us ended up with what they call 'the third sex'. We were so wasted, and they looked so feminine, that we didn't realize it at first. I mean they really looked like women, boobs and all."

“Ok, please continue ...”

“Well, to make a long story short, it was the best blowjob of my life and she-he looked better than my ex-girlfriend. I’m still in e-mail contact with Angong. You talk about a subject for a novel. She-he has lived, and continues to live, a mind-blowing life. Ok, now it’s your turn; how about you?” *Whew, thank God, he’s not some homophobe.*

“Oh, gosh, I can’t tell you how many women have eaten me out.” <gulp> *What did she just say? Am I up for this?*

“Oh,” David leaked out, very meekly.

“Half of the people who flirt with me in the Wally World checkout line are females.” *Whew! Someone pour some ice cubes down my trousers. She’s verbally titillating me, and she knows it. / I think I have his complete attention now.*

“Can we go to a commercial now?” David laughed self-consciously as he exhaled through O-shaped lips.

“Don’t worry; I won’t bite it off, David.” *Am I going to end up on the news like Mark? She’s got incredible game. Incisive and dissective. [sic] And catalytic!*

They started on their second glasses of wine. The setting sun’s reflection was languidly wobbling on the river’s ripples. It was pure Wilmington Chamber of Commerce.

David commenced the new round of dialogue while gazing at some kids on the dock, throwing bread in the water for the river fish to eat.

“Where did you grow up in Haiti, Chantelle?”

“Carrefour,” she nonchalantly replied.

“Never heard of it. Where is that?”

“Just west of Port-au-Prince, on the coast. Our hut was only eight kilometers – or five miles as you say here – from downtown.”

“Hut?”

“Yes, it was just a simple hut for the three of us. Carrefour is a very poor area, David. My dad died when I was only three from a MRSA infection. I really have no memory of him.”

“I’m very sorry, Chantelle. So very sorry.” *So much sadness and woe on this globe.*

“It’s ok. Everyone has tragedy of one kind or another in their life. It’s not an easy ride for anyone – not even for the rich ones.”

“Were you there when that massive earthquake hit?”

“No, but my mom happened to be visiting. That was in January of 2010. I lost several friends. The country still hasn’t

recovered. I really doubt it ever will. Poverty is just a way of life in Haiti, David. The opportunities are just so limited. If you don't get out by the age of twenty-five, you just resign yourself to an impoverished existence until death."

"Thanks for sharing this with me," David said as he looked down at a spider crack in the floor.

"No problem. Thanks for asking. What about you?"

"Oh, just a native Pittsburgher who grew up on the south bank of the Monongahela River in the Mount Washington neighborhood. A very ordinary, middle-class American childhood. The middle brother of a family of five. Good parents. Both still alive. Nothing too dramatic or novel-worthy. Moved to Raleigh after graduating from Pitt."

"Pitt? What's that? A seed-sowing school." She guffawed.

"Oh, sorry, Pitt is the University of Pittsburgh."

They both looked out at the river, and they both had the same thought: *Moments like these are so sublime, but so fleeting. The transient-yet-cruel beauty of this passing life.*

David rekindled the conversation. "What will be the genre for your novel, Chantelle? Action? Drama? Romance? Mystery? Suspense?" *Nymphomania?*

"Keep going. It will have all of those in it and more, David." *I'm sure that it will.*

"How about some philosophy?" David asked out of a passing wave of lecture-hall-recalling curiosity.

"It will be hiding between the lines," Chantelle said with a sly smile. She swirled the yellowy wine in her glass. "I really like this wine. It has a very nice, fruity scent and a pleasantly sweet taste. I hate the bitter wines." *I knew it.*

"Thanks. A lucky pick, I guess. I really don't know that much about wines. It takes some age to like the bitter, dry ones, I think. And, well, you're still a Beaujolais nouveau."

"Why, thank you, monsieur. [mister in French] Ready for a novel question?"

"Aim high, shoot low, princess. But not too low." *Wow, he called me 'princess'!*

"You're connected to Mark in some way, aren't you, David?" *Holy Toledo! Where did that come from?*

"Why would you think that, Chantelle?" *Damn, she's good. Very perceptive. That, or I'm very obvious. Probably more of the latter. I need to reel it in.*

"You asked me about him. Twice. At the store and here. And, you had trouble answering my simple question."

"Are you sure that you're not studying to be a lawyer?" *Gosh, I hope not. / Should I consider that field?*

“Did you kill him?” *What the fuck?! / I got him again good.*

“Hell no! I was in Raleigh asleep in my bedroom when he went off that bridge. I have an alibi. I can prove it. I didn’t know Mark; I had never met him. There’s no connection between us.” *Except that car. / Wow, I sure got his goat with that one.*

“Relax, I won’t call the cops just yet.” She started laughing. She was feeling the wine. *Man, she played me like a cheap toy with that line. And, I took her bait and made a fool out of myself. Ah, but she’s tipsy. Time to take this fine lass back to the room and impart some penile payback. I’ll get back on the gold track tomorrow morning.*

The waiter came back to their table right as they finished the bottle of wine. He had a look of mortal inevitability.

“Was everything up to par, mes amis?” [‘my friends’ in French] *Wow, our waiter knows French? Was he eavesdropping? For how long?*

“Everything was parfait!” [French for perfect] David exclaimed as he handed the waiter his debit card.

The waiter soon returned with their bill and his bankcard. David signed it, leaving a generous tip.

David then glanced at Chantelle. “Ready to go?”

“Sure,” Chantelle said with a seductive smile.

Chantelle got up and they walked back to The Stammering Man Inn. By the time they got to Ann Street, David's arm was around her waist. *This feels great. I hope he remains nice to me. Please, no Jeckyl and Hyde act. / She sure has taken my mind off of today's golden disaster. Well, almost.*

As they walked down Front Street, David realized that she now had much more information about him with regard to the great gold quest. She had won this opening round. *I know that she will use all of this in her novel one day. I'm sure of it. Just please change my name, Chantelle. Please grant me a non-associable alias.*

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Once the inn door closed, their clothes quickly came off. Chantelle slyly slid on a bright purple masquerade mask. *Wow, she's a freak! I'm in for it. And, already up for it.*

She immediately went to work on David's schlong, bringing up a sporting tumescence. She tickled his orbs and wet-vacuumed his phallus. *Oh, my ... this is heaven on Earth! / I can tell that he's never had it so good. Never.*

David was speechless and breathing in gasps. She was damn good alright, porn-star good, he imagined. *Wow, what an artsy look. Her mask is just too damn much. Too cool. She is pure erotic art in action. Dearest and highest God of gods, if it's not in the cards for me to find that forsaken gold, let me die right now with my boinging bologna in this goddess' mouth.*

David fell back on the bed. Chantelle positioned herself on top of him. They began to 69. Chantelle had applied a lilac perfume on her vulva that made David lick faster. He rubbed her clitoris with his upper lip and nose. Her pelvis was convulsing. *Why must all good things come to an end? Why? / I want to mark him with my juices for life. Don't stop, David. Don't stop!*

David was about to extinguish the flame. He needed a break or he was going to unload in Chantelle's mouth. He really didn't want to do that as Chantelle might not be expecting an impromptu protein shake. He was raised to be a gentleman.

"Condom time, dear," David said from below her lower pelvic wetness.

"Where is it? I'll do it for you." Chantelle looked back at him as she remained on all fours like a pony.

David found a condom under the pillow and handed her the individual package. She took it out and rolled it down his swollen member. It was black latex.

"Your bistouquette [penis in French slang] looks Haitian, mon ami," ['my friend' (masculine) in French] Chantelle proudly announced.

David gave a slight chuckle as Chantelle tasted the condom. He could feel her tongue and lips. *Oh, my God!*

She felt the throbs of his penile veins. *He's ready.* Chantelle then mounted David and rode him hard and fast. Occasionally she would slow down to grind her clitoris on his pubic stubble. She was getting ready to reach singularity with the universe, and so was David. *Lord, let me last a few more seconds. Must think of baseball in August. Very hot. Two outs, bottom of the sixth, no one on base. The fat manager spits in the dugout and scratches his ass. Ball boy looks at the ground, completely bored. A flying insect annoys the batter. He steps out of the box. He steps back in. He swings at the pitch. Foul tip. Umpire takes it right on the front of his mask.* The baseball-delay was a success.

They climaxed within a millisecond of each other. Chantelle collapsed on David, her lower torso still pulsating. David held her tight and kissed her forehead. Her breasts felt reassuring against his chest. They were both exhausted and fell asleep within thirteen minutes. It was 10:12 PM.

At 11:11 David got up to remove his condom and take a pee. When returning to the bed, he stopped and studied Chantelle on the bed. She was such a beautiful young lady. He wondered where this could lead. *Maybe she can help me find the gold, too. I'll feed her some small nuggets of information and see how she does.*

David got back in the bed, turned up the air conditioner, and pulled the sheet and thin blanket over Chantelle. He still felt a bit hot as he watched the Channel 8 11:00 News weather segment. It was going to be hot again tomorrow with a chance

of a late afternoon or early evening thunderstorm. *Typical summer pattern. Repeat.*

At 11:18 Cindy Santos appeared on the screen, but it was just a replay of her earlier report on the 6:00 newscast with a voice-over by the anchor in the studio. *I guess there's nothing new. I know the gold is on Dale's property. I just know it. Maybe I'll send her another quick e-mail.*

David tip-toed over to his laptop on the small table and glanced back at Chantelle. She was still sound asleep. *That's one tired young lady. I'll just let her sleep. I don't want to get her involved in this just yet.*

He opened his e-mail account. When he looked in his inbox, there was nothing new but some more Viagra spam. *I guess this is the price I pay for hitting those porn sites.*

He went to the fridge and grabbed another local microbrew. He drank it quietly in bed next to his sleeping Haitian novelist-to-be while listening to the program-menu channel's light instrumental music. He tried to think of his next move in the great gold quest, but by the fifth slug of beer he was lights-out as 11:59:59 PM became midnight.

At 12:32 AM Chantelle awoke to the glow of the TV and an instrumental version *The Shadow of Your Smile*. At the song's conclusion she flipped the channel to the local PBS affiliate. Charlie Rose had just started; he was talking to a new bestselling author. *Gosh, I would so love to be on his show*

one day. He seems so down-to-earth. But, could he be harboring any untoward secrets? Something in his smile ...

She then heard the hum of David's laptop cooling fan. *He must have forgotten to put it on sleep mode.*

She walked over to the laptop and brushed her right index finger across the touch pad. The screen lit up.

David's e-mail account was still open. She read the exchange between him and Cindy Santos. *A 'large wad of cash' missing from a safe? A murder on Van Buren Street? Hey, Mark's last name was van Buren. I've got a novel here. And maybe, just maybe, I can find out where this missing cash is. Gosh, that would be great.*

Chantelle took a pee and put her clothes back on while David snored away. She wrote a note on the inn's complimentary pad of paper; it read:

Thanks for everything!
I enjoyed the night.
Would love to meet
again and continue
our secret mission.
So sorry that I had
to leave early.
Have to work today.
Call or text me.
xoxox, Chantelle

Chantelle left the note on the dresser in order to greatly reduce the chances of David thinking that she had seen his e-mail correspondence with Cindy Santos. When she looked back at David, he was still sawing logs – clearing a small swamp forest with each inhalation.

She then left the room like a cagey cat, disappearing into the warm, incredibly dense, river fog.

David never heard the door shut.

Chapter 33

At 7:38 AM the phone on the nightstand was ringing. It was loud and annoying. On the third ring David rolled over to his right and grabbed the handset. *Where is Chantelle? Is she still in the bathroom?*

"Hello," David sleepily sputtered. *I guess Chantelle split. My erotic goddess went poof during the night. Did I not perform up to her satisfaction? Or, was it something else?*

"Hello, this is Detective Larkson from the Wilmington Police Department. Is this David Scrapalski?" *Oh, shit! It's way too early for this. Oh, crap.*

"Yes, this is he." *Cindy must have turned me in. Damn her!*

"Mr. Scrapalski, we would like to ask you a few questions with regard to the murder yesterday of Dale Smite. It should take less than twenty minutes. When do you think you could come down to the station?" *Hell, give me at least forty-five minutes.*

"Uh, I just woke up. Is eight-thirty ok?"

"Sure, that's fine. Anytime this morning."

"Where are you located?"

"We're at 615 Bess Street. Just head north on 6th Street. Eventually the road will bend sharply to the right; this is where Bess Street starts. We're on the left."

“Ok, thanks,” David said as he hung up the phone. *What a day this is going to be. Payback for last night.*

He looked back again at where Chantelle had been sleeping. He wasn’t totally surprised that she was gone. *I wonder if this episode will become part of her first novel. Well, I better take a shower and shave, and get mentally ready for this interrogation. Try to shake off this little hangover.*

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David rolled into the headquarters of the Wilmington Police Department at 8:27 AM on a humid, steam-fog Saturday morning. He was in Detective Larkson’s office at 8:30 on the dot. *Made it on-time.*

Detective Lazarus Larkson was an African American of large frame. He was in great shape and looked like a linebacker. He was bald and wore dark sunglasses. A large, brown, 24-ounce cup of convenience-store coffee proudly sat on his wooden desk. He quickly got to the crux of the matter.

“Mr. Scrapalski, did you know Dale Smite?” Detective Larkson asked while looking at his yellow notepad.

“No, I had never met him before last Friday morning,” David stated with confidence.

“Exactly when on Friday morning? And, where did you meet him?” *Stay steady, boy.*

"It must have been a quarter to nine at Shipyard Boulevard Auto Salvage."

"And, what was your reason for meeting him?" *I got this.*

"I went to Shipyard Boulevard Auto Salvage to buy a trunk door for my 2011 Ford Focus. My trunk was struck by a blown-over tree in Raleigh during Tropical Storm Dorn."

"I see. Ok, how would you characterize your conversation with Dale Smite?" *Just stick to the e-mail. Don't adlib.*

"It was just your normal business-transaction stuff. Just talk about the trunk door. The model type. Price negotiation. Nothing else."

"When did you leave the salvage lot?"

"At nine. But, I returned around two." *The exact truth.*

"You came back? Why did you come back? Did you not get your trunk door at nine?" *Ok, let's not let this blow up. Remember that Dale is dead; thus, he can't contradict whatever I say that he said.*

"I came back at two to meet with Gerald, the owner. Dale had told me that he couldn't sell me any parts off that car because it had been underwater. He told me that Gerald would have to approve any and all part sales from that car." *Gosh, I hope that sounded believable. I kind of think it didn't.*

“So, there was no sale at nine o’clock?”

“No, sir. There was no sale at that time. I left with nothing. I didn’t pay Dale a dime.” *His story checks out so far.*

“Do you know Gerald Zowen?” Detective Larkson asked with a blank expression that David couldn’t read.

“No, I had never met him until two o’clock on Friday afternoon, when I came back for the trunk door.” *No lies so far.*

“How would you describe Gerald Zowen’s demeanor?”

“He was agitated. Very upset. In fact, he was furious – furious at Dale. He kept telling me that he was going to get even with him for ripping him off. Something about a missing ‘large wad of cash’ from the safe.” *I think that sounded ok. Hope so.*

“Did he sell you the trunk door?” *Odd question. What difference would it make who sold me the trunk door? What’s his angle? What is he digging for? Gold? Ha-ha.*

“Yes, he did, Detective Larkson. Gerald gave me the proper legal disclosure; he told me that the car had been underwater for a couple of hours. I looked at the trunk; it looked fine. I bought it for one hundred and fifty dollars. He unbolted it from the wrecked car and put it inside my trunk. It’s in there now. I plan to install it once I get back to my home in Raleigh. Would you like to come out and see it? *See, I’m telling you the truth, robo-cop guy; I’m not lying. / This guy is clean.*

“No, that’s alright. Ok, so you got your trunk door around two-thirty on Friday, is that right?”

“Yes, that would be correct, sir.”

“Then why are you still in Wilmington?” *Yikes! Don’t say ‘for the water’. Think fast.*

“I had decided in advance to make a mini-vacation out of this auto-part trip to Wilmington. I hadn’t taken a vacation in some time. My boss was even demanding that I take some time off. I’d become a work-work-work robot.” *That sounds believable.*

“What else do you know about that wrecked, white, 2011 Ford Focus, other than that it was underwater?” Detective Larkson asked as he peered at David with laser sights on his brown eyes. *Don’t choke now. Just answer calmly and assuredly.*

“Well, I later learned from the Wilmington newspaper and local TV, radio, and internet news websites that the car went off the Snow’s Cut Bridge last weekend, and that the driver died in the accident.”

“Did Gerald or Dale also tell you this?” *Huh?*

“No. Neither one of them told me about the death of the car’s driver. They just told me that the car had been underwater for a considerable period of time.” *He seems to be telling the truth. / Hope he believes me. I don’t want to be here tonight.*

“One last question: “Did you know Mark van Buren or Susan van Buren?” *Whew, that’s an easy closer. No sweat.*

“No, I had never heard of their names until I saw them in the Wilmington media.” *Seems to be the truth.*

“Ok, David, you can go now. I’m done.” *Success! Maybe not a home run, but I certainly passed the test. I can tell that the police are unaware of the gold. I’m sure that it wasn’t in either vehicle. I sincerely doubt that they found it in anyone’s residence, either. It’s still somewhere on Dale’s property. Somewhere. And just waiting for me.*

“Thank you, sir. Have a fantastic day.” *Spare me, dude.*

“You, too, Mr. Scrapalski.” *It will be the most fantastic day ever if I find that gold later. / We’ll be keeping tabs on you.*

David got up and began to exit the room. *I think I did pretty well. On a scale of one to ten, I think that I would give myself a nine; ok, maybe an eight-point-five. / He’s still a person of some interest. I think he knows more than I asked.*

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David then drove back to the hotel and extended his stay by one night. When he got back in his room, he laid his aching head down on the re-sheeted bed and sank into the quicksand of sleep. He was out for four hours, and had a dream involving a bright-yellow, hand-held metal detector, combing over acres and acres of blue sand.

Chapter 34

Cindy Santos was having her customary, post-five-mile-run, Saturday afternoon, iced, herbal-fruit tea at The Wilmington Tea Emporium on Water Street when he walked in. She knew it was David as he looked just like his Facebook profile photo. She watched him walk up to the counter in his Pittsburgh Penguins jersey and order. He appeared to be about six-feet tall. Her table was only twelve feet away, just behind his right shoulder. She was close enough to hear the conversation.

“What would you like today, sir?” the young, short, brown-haired barista asked.

“I’ll have a medium, iced, mint-green tea,” David said.

“Is that all?” she asked while looking out the door at some people passing by.

“Yes, that will do it,” he answered.

David paid, and while waiting for his tea, looked around the quaint café. He caught Cindy’s eyes as she sipped her tumbler. They stared at each other for a few seconds. *That’s her! / No doubt about it – that’s him.*

Then David looked back at the barista. His tea was ready. He grabbed the tall glass and paused. *Ok, how do we do this? What to say?*

An adjacent, thin-armed, red, antique chair was repositioned; its feet screeched on the concrete-slab floor. *Yow!*

David then walked over towards Cindy's round table, tumbler in hand. He made eye contact for a split second with Cindy. *I think she knows who I am.*

Cindy quickly looked down and studied her smartphone, pretending not to notice his approach. Her hair was in a ponytail, which passed through the adjustable-strap hole on the back of her orange-billed San Francisco Giants cap.

"I don't think we've formally met. My name is David. David Scrapalski." *Not the most flamboyant opening line, but at least he's being honest. / I sure hope it's her. If not – awkward!*

"Oh, yes, you're that guy who sent me the e-mail with the tip for an exclusive." *Of course, it's me. Why is everyone so coy in this town?*

"Is this seat taken? I have some more info." *Well, he's certainly not shy. / I hope some big, burly, Mr. Macho guy doesn't emerge from the men's room.*

"That seat is reserved for San Francisco Giants fans only. Just kidding! Have a seat." Cindy could see that she had really shocked him with her little sports-team joke. His stunned expression was just too funny, yet a little unsettling. *Wow, I didn't know that he would be so stunned. Maybe I shouldn't have said that. / She really got me with that one. One-nil.*

"Thanks. It's nice meeting you."

“Likewise. Are you from Pittsburgh?” *She already knows that’s where I’m from. She’s just being a good investigative reporter, looking for any signs of lying.*

“Yep. Steelers, Penguins, Pirates and Pitt Panthers all the way. I live in Raleigh now.” *Good, he’s telling the truth.*

“You don’t root for the [Carolina] Hurricanes? Shame on you!”

“Well, I do when they’re not playing the Penguins, which is like over ninety-five percent of the time.”

“How about NBA?” Cindy inquired.

“Bobcats, wait, I mean Hornets. I just heard that they’re changing their name back. Ok, so, who do you root for – besides the baseball Giants?”

“I’ve been here a little while now. I root for the Panthers, Hurricanes, and Bobcat/Hornets. When North Carolina gets a major league baseball team, I’ll take my SF cap off and put it in the closet. I guess you must love the fact that Pitt is joining the ACC.” [Atlantic Coast Conference]

“Oh, yes; that’s sweet. I’ll be able to see them play in Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill. I think we’ll hold our own in football; in basketball, well, we shall see.”

“Ok, now that we’ve got the sports segment out of the way, would you have some more details about the murder of Dale Smite?” *I wonder what details she already knows.*

“Will you run to the police with it again?” David gave her the eye. *Oh, gosh.*

“Did the police question you?” Cindy looked surprised.

“They sure did. About six hours ago.” *Oh, dear.*

“I’m so sorry. All of the TV station’s e-mail traffic is monitored. One of the IT guys probably saw it flagged by a filter and forwarded it to the Wilmington police. They never told me. I really do apologize for that.”

“It’s ok. I actually learned more than they did.”

“Learned more about what?” Cindy was intrigued. *Is this just an atypical, intentionally vague, male ploy to try to get me in the sack?*

“Well, let’s just say it wasn’t over a ‘large wad of cash’.” *Wad – what a word.*

“What was it over? Drugs? A woman? A debt owed?”

“Those are three great answers, but they’re all wrong.” *Struck out. Even more curious to know now.*

A mother and her seven-year-old son passed by, scraping their table. Cindy and David halted their dialogue until they were out of earshot. Cindy grabbed her tea to make sure it wouldn’t be knocked off the small table.

“Well, you got me; I’m stumped,” Cindy confessed. “And, I imagine that the police are, too, David.”

“They are. I can tell from my interrogation that they still don’t know the root cause of the killing. They’re grasping at any grain of sand that falls in their lap.” *I’d like to examine his lap someday.*

“And, you do know?” Cindy wasn’t sure if he was for real or not, but thought she would play along anyway, just to see where he was leading her. *I have more information than David knows, and can quickly catch him in a lie or a false assumption.*

“I might,” David said as he rubbed his chin like a theoretical physicist on the verge of a breakthrough dark-matter hypothesis.

“Might you tell me?” Cindy pretended to be extremely interested. The case had already started to somewhat bore her. *One knucklehead kills another knucklehead, probably during an incredibly stupid, intoxicated argument. Killed knucklehead had something that belonged to killer knucklehead. Killer knucklehead promptly gets arrested. End of story. Just another violent crime between a pair of dolts.*

“I could. But, you will have to win back my confidence and trust in you.” *Oh, really?*

“And, what might you want me to do? Walk on red-hot coals while chanting ‘mea culpa’?”

“White-hot coals,” David specified with a mischievous grin.

They both chuckled. *He’s harmless, though not completely clueless. / Would love to examine her software.*

“Ok, silly guy, is it something to do with stocks or bonds? Some kind of securities swindle?” *I love her Filipina accent.*

“Hey, you only get three strikes. But, no, your fourth swing missed the ball, too. You’re out! Go back to that AT&T Park dugout.” David laughed. He was enjoying having the high card in this conversation.

Cindy just sat there, looking very puzzled. *A man has been murdered in broad daylight in his own home, and this David guy knows something about the crime that makes him laugh. Odd. Very odd. I obviously don’t know everything about this.*

“Well, baseball rules were never my forte, Mr. Scrapalski,” Cindy calmly stated. “Listen, I must be going. It’s been great talking to you in person. You can text any other info to me at my personal cell number.” *She trusts me. / I better not get a sausage-shot from him ... well ...*

Cindy waited for him to get his cell phone out of his left-front pants pocket. When he got to his Add New Contact page, she recited her phone number. *Wow! An 00 ending. Did she pay extra for that?*

“Ok, I got it,” David said while looking down at his cell phone. *I can't believe that I've got her phone number. / What have I just done? That was reckless, Cindy.*

“Just don't abuse it,” Cindy warned firmly. “One non-tip, one flirtatious message, one inappropriate image, and you're blocked. I'm not kidding.” *Ah, so she's had problems in the past with her phone. She probably dated some nut-job down here, and when she dumped him, he must've went into textual annoyance mode. / I think that I can trust him. I want to know what he knows.*

“I read you loud and clear, Miss Santos.”

“You're not some crazy reporter-stalker, are you?” Jeez, *another woman who thinks I'm out to kill her. She probably watches that truTV channel twenty hours a week.* His guess was only off by two hours – two hours too low.

She was already 97.79% sure that he was a decent guy, but thought it best to go through with the boilerplate caveat anyway.

“No, you know that I'm just an RTP lab tech with a million-dollar hidden fortune.” *What did he just say? Why did he say that? Is there something hidden on Dale Smite's property on Van Buren Street? Is that what he's alluding to? I wonder what it is.*

“Tell me more, David,” Cindy implored. *Not now, pretty lady.*

"Listen, we both must be leaving. We've got busy schedules. I'll text you another juicy morsel later in the day."

"I'll devour it if it's good; I'll cut your titi [penis in Filipino slang] off if it's junk." Cindy looked at his crotch for a second. *I wonder how it would feel in my ...*

"Tee-tee?" *I'll have to look that word up later.*

"Tea-tea." Cindy pointed to their glasses of tea. *Maybe that diversion worked. He'll probably still go to an online Tagalog-English dictionary right after he leaves.* He would.

They shook hands, both thinking that they were being ridiculously way too formal, and left the tearoom. They headed in opposite directions on Water Street. The street smelled of dead, rotting crabs.

They were both sizing up each other as they walked farther apart. David wondered how much Cindy knew about the house's contents. Cindy now was very curious as to what might be worth a million dollars at 2393 Van Buren Street.

A twenty-foot-long, thirty-inches-wide-at-the-base, hardwood tree trunk was drifting down the river. A small bird was riding on it, enjoying the free transport. David just smiled at the little, light-brown bird as it passed by the docks. It winked back as a fly landed on its left eye. *That bird is logging some free miles. If I were a writer, I'd use that thought in some novel.*

David thought about what he had said to Cindy as he walked back to the inn. *Have I lost my mind? Again? Am I going to turn out like Mark?* He just kept walking with his head down.

Then he thought that his Freudian slip of the tongue may have actually planted the right seed in Cindy's mind. He hoped that it would quickly germinate and get the best of her feminine curiosity.

His hope was justly rewarded. As Cindy walked down Front Street, she called her main contact at the Wilmington Police Department and asked if anything of interest or value was found in the house at 2393 Van Buren Street. The police sergeant told her: "Nada, as in not uh thing, Cindy. Nothing in the attic but pink insulation. Nothing in the sheet-rock walls but stale air. Nothing in the crawl space but brown recluse spiders. Nothing in the shed but a shovel and some sand." *A sandy shovel? Hmmm ...*

Chapter 35

Chantelle got off work at 5:30 PM. She headed straight back to the house on Castle Street that she shared with two other girls, both students at Cape Fear Community College.

They lucked into a great deal on the three-bedroom house, which was just outside the now-expensive, rapidly gentrifying, sign-designated historic district. It was in the old African American section of Wilmington, between 9th and 10th Streets. There was a great soul-food restaurant two hundred feet away, and the WAVE (local) bus station was just a block away. The community college was an easy eleven-minute bike ride, or seven minutes in the car when it was raining.

Chantelle arrived at 5:55 PM to an empty house. Her roommates were working. She got a bottled water from the refrigerator and sat down on the used, chocolate-brown, faux-felt couch that one of her roommates had scored. She flipped on the TV. The teasers for the 6:00 news were airing on Channel 8. *Wonder if there are any new developments.*

During the commercial break, Chantelle's mind recalled David's e-mail exchange with Cindy Santos. *A 'large wad of cash'? How large? David sure is interested in it. That's why he's down here; I can tell that this is the focus of his stay in Wilmington. But, why would he tip off a TV reporter, who surely would forward it to the police? Why wouldn't he try to retrieve it for himself? Why does he want someone else to find the 'large wad of cash'? Is it counterfeit? When it's found, does one of his enemies go to jail? Or, is there some note with it that benefits him in some way? This is weird.*

The 6:00 newscast began with the anchors telling the viewers that Cindy Santos had breaking news with regard to the murder of Dale Smite. Suddenly, Cindy Santos was back in front of 2393 Van Buren Street.

"I've just learned from an anonymous source that Dale Smite parked inside his privacy-walled back yard around ten yesterday morning. He closed the gate behind him, but left less than ten minutes later, only to return again at a quarter after one. Gerald arrived around two-thirty. Police tell me that they have not recovered anything of interest from the house or shed, from Gerald's Shipyard Boulevard Auto Salvage, or from either vehicle. Gerald Zowen, the suspected murderer, is in custody at the city jail, but he is not talking."

Cindy brushed her long black hair out of her eyes. It was gusty. A thunderstorm was now approaching. The fill-in anchorman had a question for her.

"Cindy, do they have a possible motive for this murder?"

"Tom, revenge for robbery is now being floated as a possible motive for this murder. However, the police are unsure as to what was actually stolen from Gerald Zowen by Dale Smite. Gerald Zowen is no help; he remains uncooperative. The Wilmington Police Department wants anyone with any information regarding this murder to call them at once. Cindy Santos reporting for Channel 8 News."

The TV camera was focused on the privacy-wall gate at the end of the driveway, which was half open, as Cindy closed her on-location news segment. In the distance, the metal shed could be seen, which, too, had one of its doors open. A small shovel could be seen lying on the shed's bare, sand-sprinkled, plywood floor. *Hmmm ...*

Yellow crime-scene tape blew in the evening breeze; it draped over the wooden gate and around the house. Chantelle began to ponder the situation as it stood. *So, they still haven't found that 'large wad of cash' ... I wonder where it could be. Maybe he buried it. But, the money would decompose in the soil. Is it really a 'large wad of cash'? Maybe David just threw that false tidbit out to Cindy, just to see what she would do with it. Maybe he just wanted to have the house, shed, salvage-yard office, and vehicles searched by the police to rule out those possible hiding places. Maybe it's really a very valuable object – an object that you could safely and quickly bury. I bet it's buried somewhere in that back yard. When Dale pulled into the back yard, I bet that's when he buried the object. Boy, I'd love to run a metal detector over that yard.*

Chantelle turned on her tablet computer and went to Google Maps. She entered 2393 Van Buren Street, Wilmington, NC. She zoomed in on the parcel. She studied the overhead image of the back yard. It was devoid of any shrubs. One old-and-quite-large live oak was in a back corner. The shed that was just on the news sat in the other back corner of the small rectangular lot. *Now if I was burying something and I wanted to stay out of view, where would I choose to bury it? Certainly not in the center of the yard as the neighboring two-story*

house would offer several vantage points. Probably along the privacy wall. In a corner. In the corner behind the shed! It looks like there's just enough space. That's got to be where that Dale guy buried the pièce de résistance – the supreme object of David's desire. You would be shielded from view on three sides; the fourth side would not be an issue as the people in the single-story house could not see over the eight-foot-high privacy wall.

Images of various models and types of metal detectors soon filled Chantelle's computer screen. Darn, there's no metal detector store open at this time in Wilmington. *Wait, Denise has one! That one her dad gave her. He told her to have fun combing the beaches for spare change. Where is it? I'll just peek in her room. She won't mind. She won't be back in until after eleven.*

Chantelle entered Denise's bedroom. She didn't see it anywhere in plain view. She checked under the bed. Just a chocolate-flavored condom wrapper. *Was David over here pumping Denise while I was at work? Oh, why do I think such crazy thoughts? Because I'm a female.* She giggled.

Upon opening the closet, she was greeted with a hanger rod crammed with clothes. She parted some blouses, and there it was: a super-nice, high-end metal detector with the headphones still attached. She flipped it on; it chirped loudly. *Yey! The battery is still good.* She snagged it and walked back into the living room.

There she grabbed a pen from the coffee table. *What should I say? 'Denise, I borrowed your metal detector.' 'Oh, really?' 'Yes.' 'And, exactly where did you go metal detecting, Chantelle?' 'Why do you want to know?' Hmmm ... Second thought, I better not leave a note. Denise won't know that it's gone tonight.*

Chantelle fine-tuned the sensitivity and then placed it in the back seat of her silver VW bug. She drove away, heavy in thought. *I'll scout out that neighborhood first. Just get the lay of the land, as they say in America. Yeah, that's it – I'll familiarize myself first with the immediate vicinity. Find out what I need to look out for.*

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Dusk was dusting the Spanish moss in Sunset Park as Chantelle turned right onto Central Boulevard. At Van Buren Street, she made a right. She slowed down. She was soon in front of 2393. She saw the shovel on the floor of the shed. *Should I buy my own shovel, or wear gloves and use that one?*

She continued down the street, making a right onto Northern Boulevard, followed by a right onto Jackson Street. *Let's get a rear view of the house and back yard, and see what kind of house backs up to 2393. Hopefully it's not occupied by a family of eight. Please, not that.*

At the modest, vacant, single-story house directly behind 2393 Van Buren, she stopped behind a parked, white, 2011 Ford Focus. She saw the back of a white male's head in the

car. She studied the shirt collar, hair and the ears a little closer. *Holy shit! It's David! What in the world is he doing here? How long has he been here?*

David looked in his rear-view mirror; they made eye contact. David smiled. *So, she knows more than I thought. / I guess I'm busted. I wonder if he'll be mad – homicidally mad.*

David got out of his car and walked back to Chantelle's. She wasn't sure what to expect.

"Why, hello there, Chantelle," David said as he leaned in her car with a big smirk. "I didn't see your text message about this evening rendezvous."

"Was your phone turned off?" she sheepishly countered.

He let out a false chuckle. "Imagine meeting you here and now. What are the chances?" David eyed the metal detector in the back seat of her car.

"Improbable for sure," Chantelle offered.

"Do you always go metal detecting in Sunset Park on Saturday evenings?" David gave her the raised eye.

"Let's go somewhere and talk. Are you hungry?" *I need to lower his ire a few levels.*

“Not really. We can’t talk in a restaurant or a bar. It’s way too risky. Let’s go to Greenfield Park. Just follow me.” *What?! Is he going to kill me and dump my body in that swampy lake?*

As Chantelle followed David’s white Ford Focus in her silver VW Beetle, she noticed the dented trunk door. *I wonder how that happened. It doesn’t look like an automobile collision caused that. Was it caused by a human body being slammed down on it? Was it from the body of the last girl he killed because she knew too much?*

They pulled off into an empty parking lot on West Lake Shore Drive. No doors opened for several seconds. *Gosh, I hope this isn’t where he kills me. Does he have a gun in his car?*

After an eerily tense pause, they both got out of their cars, almost in unison, and walked down to a bench beside the dark-green-surfaced lake. There was a lone, mature, Spanish-moss-laced cypress tree on its own tiny island, about fifty feet in front of them.

“You see that cypress tree out there, Chantelle?” David asked her while pointing to it with his nose.

“Yes,” Chantelle cautiously responded.

“I feel like that cypress tree. I’m surrounded by dark water that I can’t trust. I don’t know what evil lurks beneath the surface. Maybe I’m already having my roots gnawed off.”

“Oh, I’m not that bad. I’m just a girl doing some more field research. Just gathering more data for my novel.”

“With a metal detector?” David blurted.

“Hey, the spare change along sidewalks adds up. This girl is a struggling student, remember?”

“I remember that I left my e-mail account open.” *Oh, no.*

Chantelle sighed and looked up at the ominous clouds. “Ok, let’s both come clean. I’ll even go first.”

“Fire away, ma belle romancière.” [‘my beautiful novelist’ in French] *How much French does he know?*

“I know that there’s something of great value on that parcel of land at 2393 Van Buren Street. I kind of doubt that it’s money. Maybe a gold trophy or small statue – maybe an Oscar! – or, maybe a sack of gold coins – something that can be buried easily and safely.”

“Well, you got the gold part right,” David said. *Oh, hell, I may as well just tell her. I need her metal detector tonight.* “There are two large gold nuggets.” *There’s enough to share, and she won’t run to the police. Or, will she? I don’t think so. She wants some of that precious metal, too. Yeah, she’s got the fever.*

“Buried in the back yard, right?” Chantelle’s face lit up. She loved the treasure-hunt aspect to this mystery.

“Yes, I truly believe that it’s buried somewhere in that back yard,” David concurred.

“Well, what’s the plan, captain?” *Captain?*

“I’ve got some good news: The house directly behind 2393 Van Buren on Jackson Street is not occupied, and as you may have noticed, it has no fences. I put on my white tech outfit – to look official for the neighbors – and walked back to the privacy wall. I noticed that with just a little bit of digging in the loose sand, one of us could slide under the wall with no problem – maybe both of us to speed up the metal detecting and digging.”

“What if a neighbor sees us going under the fence?”

“That’s a risk we’ll have to take. But, believe me, the payoff will blow your mind. You’ll be able to self-publish your novel. Have twenty thousand copies printed in the first run.”

“Wow! I’m in.” *That was easy.*

“I thought that was my line,” David said and began to laugh. *Such a goof, he is.*

“There are two large shrubs that will offer some cover when we dig under the privacy wall. We can dress in black attire to reduce our chances of being seen. I’ve got some black pants, black shoes, black socks, and I just bought a flat-black sweatshirt and a black ski mask. Do you have a black outfit, Chantelle?”

"My birthday suit," she said with a wry smile.

"Your birthday suit is too sexy for this operation, ma belle. ['my beautiful sweetheart' in French] *Yey! He still likes me.*

"Sure, I can go back and get it from my house on Castle Street. How long do you think we'll have to use the metal detector, searching for the burial spot?"

"I don't think we'll have to use it for more than five minutes, max. We'll turn the audio signal off and just go by the LED light."

"I've got headphones, too."

"Chantelle, we need to be able to communicate at a low volume. If one of us has the headphones on, the other person will have to raise their voice. And then a neighbor or a dog could hear us."

"Got it. That makes sense." *His brain seems to be working tonight.*

"Plus, Chantelle, if someone sees the headphones on our ears, it's game over." *That is true.*

"What about dogs? They often bark, you know."

“Great question. Luckily for us, the nearest dog is two houses away. He or she may go in at night. It was in and out of the house the past hour.”

“I sure hope that the canine is in tonight, David.” *So do I.*

“Either way, I think we’ll be ok, dog-wise.”

“Hey, do you watch the old *Mission: Impossible* reruns on TV Land, David?” Chantelle asked with a slight grin. “For some reason I remembered an episode involving a dog and some hidden treasure.”

“Yep, I think I saw that one. I watch *MacGyver* as well ... for laughs.”

They both chortled. *What are you in for, girl? / I can still use her, but she’ll bear watching from now on.*

“Ok, back on-point. How heavy is this golden booty?” *Booty.*

“Between thirty-five and forty pounds. Just two, sexy, slender kidney-shaped nuggets. Hall-of-fame material. Trust me, pictures of these golden fillets will be going in the history books and littering Google Images. They’ll have names.”

“What about lighting? Do we need a flashlight?”

“No, it’s way too risky. The jerky beam of a flashlight is a dead giveaway. The neighbors would see it on or above the privacy wall and think there was a prowler. The cops would be here in

four minutes. We've got a first-quarter moon tonight. That should be the perfect amount of light."

"When do we commence this operation, commander?" *What's with these military ranks? Does she think this is some special-ops exercise?*

"I was thinking three or three-thirty. The drunks should be home from the bars by then."

"And, what do we do for the next seven-or-so hours, my golden corporal?" *She wants to fuck. / I hope he gets my drift.*

"Well, my hotel room has new linens." *Such a horndog, he is. / I hope I didn't shock her.*

They heard a thunderclap. The evening storm was upon them. Then there was a flash of lightning to the north. Heavy rain was on its way. A few, big, fat, leading-edge drops were beginning to go splat.

"I'll go back to my house and get my flat-black spy outfit. I should be over at the inn around eight."

"Eight is great, but don't be late." *Because if you are ...*

"Spare me the lame poetry, Scrapalski. Gosh, your last name sounds like a hockey defenseman, Mr. Pittsburgher."

They gave each other a long inquisitive look before separating. Both of them had the same thought: *Will he/she try to take all of the gold as soon as I leave?*

Chantelle drove straight home, convinced that David would not screw her out of a slice of the golden stash. *I've got a good metal detector; he doesn't even have one. And, David can't even get one tonight. He absolutely needs my metal detector. He'll wait for me.*

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David tootled around the neighborhood until 7:45 PM. The thunderstorm gave him some cover, as he plied the same streets: Van Buren – Central – Jackson – Southern – Harrison – Northern – Monroe. It appeared to him that Chantelle had indeed gone home; he never saw her car. *Maybe she's actually trustworthy. No one else has been.*

He then rushed back to the inn, making sure that he was there first. He was. *I'm so glad that I didn't see her car sitting here. That would have been awkward. Very awkward.*

He looked at his cell phone. He noticed that he had received a text message at 7:39 PM from an unknown number. *Strange, I never heard the text alert.*

Chapter 36

At 7:37 PM Cindy Santos was wrapping up some voice-overs and paperwork in her office at the Channel 8 TV studio. She was going over her recent notes regarding Dale Smite's murder. She scrolled down the memo pad on her smartphone.

- > Gerald Zowen in city jail; sullen – still not talking to anyone
- > Police's 2nd search of the house and shed yields nothing of interest
- > Police's 2nd search of both vehicles yields nothing of interest
- > Police's 3rd search of wrecked Ford Focus turns up some gold specks in trunk, under spare tire, during a wipedown.
- > Autopsy of Dale Smite confirms three 38-caliber shots to the face from very close range
- > No gold found on Dale or Gerald
- > No 'large wad of cash' found at Dale's house or in his vehicle
- > Police plan on searching the back yard with a metal detector on Sunday morning

She started thinking about David, the great gold chaser. Well, if he doesn't extract that gold from the property tonight, the police will find it tomorrow. It'll end up in a museum display case somewhere in Wilmington, Raleigh or Charlotte. Should I tip him off? I don't want to get implicated in this, though. Oh, I know how I'll get the message to him.

Cindy grabbed her secondary, rarely used, personal cell phone. It was the one that she used for situations like this. The cell phone's number was blocked from being displayed on a

receiving phone; moreover, no one – not even her family in California – knew the number. The phone never rang. She had it set up so that it couldn't receive calls or texts. It was a purely one-way, anonymous-sender, message-transmission device. *Should I really do this? Sure, why not? He was a gentleman at the tearoom. He seems like a decent guy. I'll let his gold-quest adventure continue – maybe to a fruitful end. Perhaps he'll even compensate me for the tip. Wait, it's not traceable to me. But, he'll know it's from me. Who else would send him such a tip? Gosh, I hope he doesn't get arrested tonight. No, he seems pretty smart. A techie from the RTP. He will have thought it through.*

Cindy opened her old flip-phone and typed:

I'm throwing you a bone, big dog.
Time is of the utmost essence. You
must unearth your treasure tonight.

She hit Send, waited five seconds, turned it off and snapped it shut. *Mission accomplished. Good luck, sport!*

She then checked her Facebook account. There was a friend request from David and from someone or group going under the alias of Psecret Psociety. She glanced at the featured pics. *Sounds arcane and intriguing. I wonder if David is in this esoteric club, too. I wonder what it's all about. Is anyone that I know in this group?* She accepted both.

Cindy quickly perused David's pics. *All single. He must have gotten rid of all the ex-girlfriend pics. Good boy, David. He looks a shade Korean in this one.*

She checked his relationships status. He listed himself as single. *Well, he appears to be.* (Neither David nor Chantelle had posted any pics of themselves together yet on Facebook.)

She then checked out the Psecret Psociety page. *Definitely some surreal strangeness here.* Then she viewed some of the agent folders. *Weird. They've all been assigned agent numbers and they're from all over America. There's David – Agent 888. And, that girl lives in Vietnam. And, this guy lives in England. Heck, they're from all over the world. How was this put together? Why was it put together? I'll have to look into this more later.* Then she got up to go home.

When Cindy reached the front lobby, she noticed a moth whirling around a floor lamp in the lobby. It had two light-bulb sockets, but one light bulb had been removed. The moth swung too wide while looping the bright 100-watt bulb. Poof!

There was a blue flash and a puff of gray smoke. The moth had landed right in the open socket and got a fatal 110-volt zap. *Wow, what are the chances of witnessing such an odd occurrence? People only see such events in the crazy novels that I read.*

Chapter 37

David went back inside his room at The Stammering Man Inn on Front Street. He grabbed a craft beer from the fridge and sat in the armchair. *That no-caller-ID/no-reply-possible text message obviously came from Cindy. She must have another cell phone for such under-the-radar texting. Why, she's a cute TV news reporter – of course she does. I think that she wants me to find the treasure. I think I can trust her. It's now fourth down; I'm going for it.*

At 8:01 there was a rapid knock on the door. He went over to the door. *Sexy has arrived.*

"What's the password?" David asked playfully.

"Let me in!" Chantelle screamed, and then giggled.

David opened the door to find Chantelle getting drenched by the heavy downpour. Her hair was soaking wet. She quickly dashed into his room and got a towel from the bathroom.

"Just a little shower, my lass." David smiled at her.

"Shower, my ass! I'm soaked!"

"Would you like for me to dry you off, madam?"

"That would be great, monsieur."

David took the partially wet towel from her and laid it on the bed. He got a clean, dry towel from the bathroom.

He began to undress Chantelle as she sat on the bed. He took her black, long-sleeve, polyester fleece top off first. Then he reached behind her and undid her black 34 C bra. *What a perfect pair!*

Her skin was wet. David dried her off with the new towel as he felt a mountain growing under the equator. Chantelle noticed his budding crotch bulge, too. She unzipped David's black jeans and pulled down his zebra-striped boxers. *Where in the world did he get these boxers?* He was already almost fully rigid.

David dried her back while she gave him a lovely lizard lick. *Oh my, she's tongue-tastic!*

David finished up the drying of Chantelle's body and began to caress her supple breasts. They felt so good in his hands. *This girl's got one helluva body. She feels like Lady Luck. Lady Good Lick-Luck.*

Chantelle began to slide her mouth up and down his pecker faster and faster. She tasted his preliminary secretion. *I better stop or he's going to unload a pint of goo in my mouth. I don't think that's what either of us wants. I have already had my protein for today.*

Chantelle stood up and pulled down her black velvet leggings and black thong. David knew what to do. The cunnilingus went on for eleven minutes. Her moans came from another world.

This is how I want to die someday: ecstatic death by flickering tongue.

When his lower face was thoroughly marked by her fluids, he rolled a chocolate-flavored condom on his bronzed pickle and presented his wrapped sausage to Chantelle. She licked it a few times, then looked up at him and smiled.

Chantelle laid her svelte body back on the bed. David pumped her missionary style for fourteen minutes, changing his speeds and fondling her curves. When he was almost at orgasm, he pulled his member out, quickly rolled off the condom, and shot his opalescent load on Chantelle's perfect ebony breasts and flat stomach. He felt so gratified. *I now know what my boy has seen on the internet. / Should I have done that? She might now wonder about my internet habits.*

"Oh, my God, I wasn't expecting that pornographic finish," Chantelle said, while looking at David's translucent expellant rivuleting down her left side onto the wet white towel. *I wonder if he is addicted to porn. It seems like every guy I meet is.*

"Oh, sorry, I guess I got carried away in the hyper-sensual fantasy that is Chantelle." *Nice recovery, dude. / Hope she liked that remark.*

"Hey, I like the sound of that," she said as she rose up and toweled off his splooge. "I'll have to use it in my novel, David."

"I think we make a great team, Chantelle. A novel team." *A novel team? Well, he is essentially writing the male character for me.*

"A great cream team?" Chantelle asked as she smiled at him and raised her eyebrows as she went to the bathroom to take a shower.

David just smiled fiendishly. *She's something else. I really struck gold with her. Now to find the elemental variety – time to unearth super-fine 79. [Gold's atomic number]*

While Chantelle was in the shower, David looked at the crenulations in the antique-white ceiling and started to think about how the night would go at 2393 Van Buren Street. *Gosh, I hope the police don't find it before we do. That would suck ... forever. Nothing could be more deflating. I'd be haunted for life. Maybe even go mad and commit suicide like poor Susan.*

Chantelle was rinsing her vulva when she had a startling thought. *What if David kills me after we find the gold? I will no longer be needed at that point. He'll find another girl to fuck. But, she won't be able to please him like me. I saw his face; he was in heaven. He never had it so good. But, he'll have over a million dollars! He'll be able to buy some high-priced, hyper-nympho whore as his live-in. No, he's not like that. But, he is a man. That damn zézette [French slang for penis] between their legs really affects their thinking.*

Chantelle opened the bathroom door and began to do her hair. The mirror lights projected Chantelle's silhouette onto the white wall.

"I see a seductive shadow on the wall," David said in an overtly affected tone of voice. "A VERY seductive shadow."

"You better be a good boy or the shadow will attack you," Chantelle said in a playful, maniacal tone.

"What do you think our biggest liability is tonight, my sexy accomplice?" *Accomplice? I guess I am at this point.*

"You," she boldly stated as she tried to suppress her giggles. *What? Who?*

"Me? No way. This boy is fully prepared to win the gold sweepstakes tonight and share it with his Haitian princess." *That was nice of him to include me. But, was it too nice? Too artificial sounding? Maybe I just need to stop thinking that he's going to kill me. Just relax your mind, girl. Quiet those negative thoughts. Get a grip; this isn't a ghastly crime novel. Or, is it?*

About ten minutes later, the hair dryer shut off. The shadow on the wall got thinner. Chantelle had a simple request for David.

"David, could you bring me my clothes?"

“Sure, one minute,” David said as he began to gather her black garments. He brought them to the bathroom. Chantelle, with a white towel around her head, took them and smiled.

“How much do I owe you, bellboy?”

“You just lost a gram of gold,” David said as he walked back to the bed to lie down.

Chantelle then emerged from the bathroom and sat on the edge of the bed, running her fingers through her shoulder-blade-length, dark-as-a-starless-night hair.

“You look pensive, David. We can do this! Don’t worry. We can succeed in this golden odyssey.” *Odyssey? Yeah, that’s the right word for this.*

“I know we can, too. I’m just wondering if we should do this in two phases.” *Oh, no ...*

“What do you mean?” Chantelle was very curious to know what he was thinking, what his change of plan was.

“I was thinking that maybe we should dig out a passage under the privacy wall first. Then leave and return a few hours later to detect the gold and dig it up. What do you think?” *He’s going to overthink this if I don’t stop him.*

“I guess it has its advantages and disadvantages,” she said diplomatically while running her skinny fingers through her

semi-coarse hair. *Certainly more disadvantages. / Disadvantages? Huh?*

“The way I see it, Chantelle, the big advantage is that we aren’t ever there for more than ten minutes. And, when we come back the second time for the gold, we can quickly slide under the privacy wall and get right to work, finding and extricating the gold in short order.” *What did he just say?*

“Extricating. I’ll make sure to use that word in my novel.”

“It’ll cost you another gram.”

They both laughed. *I’ve got to keep him on-script. / Can I really totally trust her after what I found her doing earlier? Do I really have a choice now? Not really.*

Chantelle leaned over towards his face and looked into his brown eyes. “Golden boy, the disadvantage is now you have to cross the front and back yards of the vacant house on Jackson Street four times instead of just twice.” *That’s true. She’s got a good head on her shoulders. A lovely head.*

“That’s a salient observation, Chantelle. And, yes, you can use that word in your first novel.”

Chantelle studied his now-serious face. She was growing to love it. *I hope he wants me as much as I want him. I don’t want anyone else.*

David continued. "We could go in your car the first time with just a short shovel and park on Southern Boulevard. Oh, wait, we don't have a shovel."

"That's not a problem; my Super Wally World has shovels, and it's open all night."

"Hey, you want to go there now?" *Absolutely.*

"Fine by me. I'll just wait in my car for you. I don't like going in there when I'm off." *Will she drive off while I'm in the store? No, I don't think so. And, even if she did, I could have the cops there faster than she could have it unearthed. But, would I really want to get the police involved? Hell no! And, she knows that. Well, life is about taking chances. Fingers crossed.*

"Ok, I understand. Let's go."

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They didn't talk on the sixteen-minute drive to the large-box, one-level, discount, department-and-grocery store. Halfway there, Chantelle switched on the radio to break the unnerving silence. The song *Golden Years* by David Bowie was playing. *I'll stick with you baby for a thousand years ... Oh, yeah! / Song of the night. What were the chances of us hearing that song on this fateful night? Way too hard for me to calculate now. Sure hope that was a harbinger of things to come.*

Chantelle parked her still-shiny-from-the-recent-car-wash-and-wax VW bug in front of the Monkey Junction Super Wally

World at 10:13 PM. She told David where the shovels were located in the store. Then David got out. She rolled her window down as David walked around the front of the car.

“You wouldn’t leave me here, would you, ma chérie?” [‘my darling’ (feminine) in French] David asked, now not totally sure if she would bolt.

“No, I still need you.” She laughed.

David grinned at her, then walked into the store with his head down. *What kind of answer was that? Am I going to get rolled later by her goons? Maybe even offed? No, I think she’s just playing. I hope.*

He quickly found the shovel section. David decided to go with a short, narrow spade. It looked perfect for the task. He was back at her car in only nine minutes.

“Wow, that was quick!” Chantelle exclaimed as they began to leave the parking lot for US 421 North.

David gently placed the spade on the rear-seat floorboard, and then glanced at looking-straight-ahead Chantelle. “Yeah, I found a checkout that had just opened. I was first in line – no wait at all.”

“Just curious, who was the cashier?”

“Some Hispanic guy named Ricky.”

“Oh, I’ve already fucked him. Twice.” *What the hell did she just say?!*

David looked shocked, like he had seen the ghost of the old Baldhead Island Lighthouse. *Is she just some out-of-control nymphomaniac? C’mon, David, don’t let the little head make the big decisions. Don’t be a fool. It’s not too late to abandon her ship. Don’t let lust make you stupid! You can’t blow this. It’s most likely the last chance to reclaim that gold.*

Chantelle smiled and began laughing hysterically. “I got you again, David. What a face! Gosh, you’re too easy, loverboy.” *I really don’t know what to think of this girl, but I’m going along for the ride – literally.*

As they approached the intersection with Independence Boulevard, David proposed a new plan to Chantelle. “What if you drop me off and circle the block while I dig out a passage under the privacy wall. Better yet, I’ll do everything in one swoop: I’ll dig out a passage, detect the gold, dig it up, and bring it out. I bet I could do it all in under fifteen minutes. You would pick me up, and we’d be gone. You wouldn’t even have to get dirty.”

“Or, you leave with all the gold for yourself when I’m on the other side of the block,” Chantelle countered.

“No. Hell, no, Chantelle. I’m going to give you a gold fillet worth half a million dollars. And, besides, I would be on foot. I can’t carry forty pounds of gold, a shovel, and a metal detector

two and a half miles back to the inn. The cops would pluck me off Front Street, if the thugs didn't pick me off first."

"You could call a taxi."

"You have got to be kidding, Chantelle. I can't hide it on my person." *My person?*

"Then, on who else's person?" *What? She says the oddest things.*

"Listen, my sly, super-sexy lady. The cabbie would demand a chunk of it or turn me in to the cops, or maybe even roll me for all of it. This much gold makes people crazy."

"Well, you're living proof of that, mon ami."

"Ok, ha-ha-ha. Very funny, cool girl. Nice zinger. Really, though ... I think it's the best plan. It takes your point into consideration: only one entrance and one exit by one person. Minimal exposure. Much less chance of being spotted by a neighbor or passerby. C'mon, what do you say? All you have to do is slowly circle the block. You could even act as a scout, should the police show up on Van Buren Street."

"Ok, I'll play." *Thank God. / This had better work out right.*

Chantelle turned her VW bug onto Southern Boulevard. It was 10:41 PM and the street was vacant. She slowly drove west towards the river.

"Maybe we should go by Dale's house first to make sure the cops aren't there," Chantelle suggested. *Smart. Very smart.*

"Excellent idea, babe." *Babe? Wow, that was nice of him.*

Chantelle made a right turn onto Van Buren. Her metallic-finished car slowly rolled by 2393. It was dark. No cars were there. There were no signs of any life anywhere. The privacy wall's driveway gate had been closed. Yellow police tape rippled in the humid, at times gusty, southwest breeze. *Cindy's right; they'll be digging up that back yard tomorrow. / We gotta do this very soon. It really is now – or regret forever.*

"Perfect. No one's there." David felt a bolt of confidence go through his spine. *Maybe, just maybe, Lady Luck stays with me tonight. Now, please don't wander off.*

"Listen, after I drop you off, I'll comb the other neighborhood streets so I don't become *that* car that just keeps going around the block." *Great idea. She's quite keen. Hopefully, I will be as well when I execute our gold-extracting operation.*

"You're so smart, Chantelle. Where would I be without you tonight?" *He has to ask?*

"You'd probably already be in jail," Chantelle said as she turned right onto Central Boulevard. *Quite possibly.*

"Yeah, you're probably right." David let out a short chuckle.

They passed a white guy in jeans sporting an ironic t-shirt, walking his dog, a beagle-feist mix. Then Chantelle turned the wheel to the right again. They were now on Jackson Street, closing in on the vacant-house drop-off point. *Almost there, almost showtime. / Gosh, I hope that he can stay on-plan.*

A cyclist with an orange shirt zoomed past them. *Wow, he's really hitting it. Does he have the gold in his backpack?* Chantelle was amused by the thought. *That guy again? There must be a large cycling group down here, and orange must be their jersey color.* David's rationalization settled his mounting anxiety. Well, just a little.

"Well, we're here," Chantelle announced as she turned the engine off. *I sure hope that this goes as planned. I don't want to go to jail. I could easily be deported. But, the reward is worth the risk. I'm not backing out. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. / Time to execute the plan. Toes crossed. Well, almost crossed. Let's not fuck this up. Must stay smart.*

David glanced at the vacant house. It was totally dark, looking like the power had been cut off. *It's probably a rental. Looks like the last tenants left several weeks ago.*

He then glanced at a flickering streetlamp thirty feet down the street. The ballast was humming. The lamp's partially dislodged plastic shield was rocking in the wind. *Well, at least it's not on top of us.*

David grabbed the metal detector and shovel. He was decked out in black – nothing but black. He pulled the black ski mask

over his head and aligned the eyeholes, and then reduced them to slits. *What if a cop drives by? One look at me and they would definitely search me and the car. Should Chantelle be the one to do this? Her dark skin would be less visible. No, just man up and do it. Yeah, I'll be ok. Well, it's time to go for the gold. Please be easy to locate, Au. Be an easy find. Just this once, be easy.*

"Loop back every five minutes, after the first fifteen minutes, Chantelle." +15, +5, +5 ...

"You got it, captain. Are you ready to go?" *I guess so.*

"I'm out." David quickly disembarked with the shovel and metal detector in hand. He scanned the street. *All clear.* He then looked at the nearby houses' windows. Only one window was lit that could see him and the dark curtain was fully drawn. *We're good to go, boy. Let's do this ... successfully.*

He motioned for Chantelle to roll and she drove off. David stealthily walked along the vine-enmeshed, chain-link fence that ran down the northern property line to the back privacy wall. *Don't think anyone saw me. Think I'm still in the clear.*

The surface of the sand was like a soggy pie crust; the grains had coalesced from the recent thunderstorm. He grabbed the spade and was amazed at how fast he was able to create a fourteen-inch gap under the privacy wall. *You sure can't dig a hole this fast in the piedmont's red clay.*

He soon saw the back of the metal shed just four feet away. *Dale, I bet you buried it right here last Friday morning. I know you did, pal.*

David pushed the shovel and metal detector through the opening, and then slithered under the privacy wall. He looked at the back of the metal shed and privacy wall corner sections. *Perfect! I'm safely in the vault. Now to find that golden stash.*

The first-quarter moon provided just enough light, though lingering clouds momentarily eclipsed it from time to time. He switched on the metal detector, immediately killing the audio beep. In a crouched position, he passed the detector's search coil over the middle of the small thirty-square-foot area between the back of the shed and the privacy wall. The red LED light lit up just seven seconds later. The metal detector's screen told him that there was a large, non-iron object twenty-eight to thirty-four inches below the surface. *Eureka! That's has to be it!*

David made an X in the sand with his right index finger. He put the metal detector down and grabbed the slender spade. He began digging an eight-inch-diameter hole straight down into the soft sand. At a depth of thirty-one inches, the tip of his spade clanged a heavy object. *Jackpot! We're in Gallery Park! Wok da woothie!*

He peered into the grayish white hole, but didn't see a yellowish color; he only saw black at the bottom. *Oh no, this aint good. Not good at all. Maybe this is the wrong spot.*

David reached way down into the cylindrical hole with his right arm. He felt a plastic bag with his index finger. *There's something hard in there.* He knuckle-tapped the bag. *Is that the gold? Feels like it. Yeah, that's it. Found it! So, Dale bagged the gold before burying it. 'Thanks for doing that, pal, as I seem to have forgotten my own black bags.'*

He had the two bags of gold unearthed within seven minutes. All was going super-swimmingly; it couldn't have been going any better. Then the dog that was two houses away began to bark. *Fuck! God damn it! Wouldn't you freaking know it? 'Shut the hell up, Fido! Please just shut the fuck up!'*

Luckily for David, the dog stopped barking after the homeowner yelled a cease-and-desist order. *Excellent. Silence is golden.* He quietly chuckled at that thought.

David threw the spoil pile of sand back into the hole and smoothed the surface over with the side of the spade, eliminating all shoe, hand and knee imprints. He even created some natural-appearing undulations in the sand before disappearing under the privacy wall with the bagged gold, spade and metal detector. Once on the other side, he filled in the gap and tossed some fallen leaves and twigs on the surface. *Great. It looks like I never went under there.*

He then grabbed the heavy bags with both hands, and pinched the metal detector under his left armpit, while pinching the spade handle under his right armpit. He looked like a grade-Z criminal as he walked, crouched over, to a dark,

secluded spot that was next to the driveway-side of the vacant house. *So far, so good ... I think ... I hope ... so.*

David was only crouched down in the shadows for a minute, when Chantelle slowly approached in her round-roof sedan. He waved at her. She looked over and saw him. She stopped. David hobbled to the car, placing the weighty, gold-laden, black bags down on the passenger-side floorboard. He then quickly threw the metal detector and the spade on the rear-seat floorboard. Chantelle smiled. *My boy scored!*

“Hit it!” David barked as he pulled the door shut.

She obliged, speeding off almost fast enough to burn out. Once they were on Burnett Boulevard, Chantelle spoke.

“That’s it?” she asked while looking at the sandy, crumpled, black trash bags under David’s feet. She was surprised at how small they were in volume; she thought that forty pounds of gold would be much larger.

“Yeah, the two fillets of pure gold are in these black bags, Chantelle,” David said as he lightly tapped his feet on them. “Just wait ‘til we get back to the room. You’ll be amazed.” *I sure hope so.*

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David toted the heavier bag of gold into the inn room, while Chantelle carried the lighter one. They placed them on the

round table. David then motioned for Chantelle to take a seat, which she did in the adjacent armchair.

Next, David carefully removed the two boomerang-shaped fillets of gold from the thick, industrial-grade, black trash liners. Chantelle's mouth was agape. *Mon Dieu! [Oh, my God!] in French]*

"You're looking at over a million dollars, Chantelle. Easily over a million. Maybe as much as 1.3 mil."

"Can I touch it, David?"

"Sure, go ahead, sweetie." *Ah, so nice of him.*

Chantelle ran her fingers over the smaller one. "Wow! Never in my wildest dreams ..."

"We've crossed a big hurdle tonight, my good-luck charm. Well, I guess 'slid under a low limbo bar' would be a better expression. However, we're not entirely home-free, my new and forever love." *I like the sound of that!*

"What do you mean, golden dong?" *Golden dong? Her words never cease to amaze me. I'm sure that her novel will be something else. How long will it take her to write it?*

David chuckled for just two seconds. "The ultimate goal is to convert the gold into cash. That is not as easy as you might think. If we do it the wrong way, we'll get caught and end up with nothing. We could even end up in jail." *Oh, great.*

“Any ideas on what to do next, mastermind?”

“Yes, I’ve already thought this out. We need to place the larger one in a stream that has a history of gold nuggets being found in it, such as one in or around Mecklenburg County. You will then take a pic of yourself pulling it from the stream, giving the illusion that you just found it. Maybe place a white quartz rock on top of it, as gold in this state is typically found in veins of white quartz. You will go public with your find, announcing it to the Charlotte media. You will be a celebrity of sorts – the new North Carolina golden girl – as your slender, crescent-shaped gold nugget will be the longest, as well as one of the heaviest, ever found. The State of North Carolina, or a wealthy gold-nugget collector, will most likely buy it. We must create the illusion that these nuggets have nothing to do with Wilmington or any place in New Hanover County. Also, I can’t be involved with this in any way, as I’m already on the police’s ‘gold watchlist’. When they don’t turn up any gold or any object of high value at 2393 Van Buren, they may start to look much closer at me. Also, Gerald will eventually talk. Your *miraculous* gold find in a piedmont stream – perhaps in that famous one east of Charlotte – may set his mouth off. He may go after me, trying to implicate me in some way.”

“Ok, you are not going to get mad if I poke a few holes in your golden, precariously low-flying, hot-air balloon, are you?” Chantelle asked while looking at him with a skewed eye.

“No, not at all. Let me know what concerns you have.”

“First off, I don’t want to be a celebrity. I’m not an attention-seeking kind of girl. I don’t want that ‘Look at me, I just won the multi-million-dollar lottery’ kind of fame. I just want to be a writer, leading a very private life, out of the spotlight. Also, the authorities will check my residency status; it’s not spotless. I could even be deported.” *What in the world has she done? Bilked a bank? Why did I think that?*

“Secondly, even if the State of North Carolina, or some wealthy gold collector, bought the nugget for maximum price, half of it would be immediately eaten up by the taxman in such a public sale. The premium for a nugget would be negated. We’d be back at the going ounce rate, or even less. And, we would now have a whole lot more headaches.” *That is an excellent point. She sure has got one profoundly perspicacious mind.*

“Thirdly, if the police are watching you, they already know about me. This town is growing, but it’s not like it’s Miami. You can’t really hide here.” *Why did she choose Miami as her big-city example? Did she enter the US via Miami? Was it a legal entry? Hmmm ...*

“Fourthly, if Gerald gets a case of the nasty tongue, where would you hide all the cash from the sale of the giant nugget? Certainly not in a subpoena-able account. Under your mattress? In the walls? Under the floor? They could get a search warrant and go through your entire house and car. Would you hide the money out in the woods? They’ll track you and eventually see you going to retrieve it.” *Possibly, but I think this scenario is unlikely.*

“Thanks for your feedback, Chantelle. You’ve made some excellent points. Based on what you’ve just said, I’ve already got a change of plan. Ready to hear it?”

“I’m all ears, dearest golden lover.” *Sweet.*

“We melt the gold down and cast it into ingots – small bars – one pound maximum, and sell them on ebay.”

“On ebay? Really? You’ve got to be kidding me. The police are always monitoring ebay for stolen items and items of interest in crimes. Also, someone buying a one-pound gold bar is going to want an independently certified metallurgist to verify the gold bar’s purity. What if the buyer is far away, like in California? Or, somewhere overseas? You get into all kinds of shipping issues. Package insurance will add up. Some packages will mysteriously disappear in transit. Everyone will point fingers at someone else. The claims process will entail a lot of questions and verification. You’ll have to declare what’s in the package. ‘And what are we shipping today, sir?’ ‘Solid gold.’ That will get you some attention at the post office. Probably get you put on another watchlist.” *Yep, she’s quite an asset. As good as gold.*

“Ok, I agree with you, smart girl.” *Did he really think I was just some dumb, easy lay?*

“What if we just sold it to some of those ‘we buy gold’ outfits?” Chantelle asked while feeling her face. She thought she felt a pimple.

David was very impressed with her comments. He truly appreciated the points that she had made. He was now deferring to her. *My boy respects my input.*

“We certainly won’t get top-dollar,” he informed her. “They’re all low-ballers who prey on people desperate for quick cash. A lot of them are pretty shady.” *And, what we’ve done is aboveboard? Get real, David.*

“But, those are the kind of people we may be forced to deal with, David.” *Gosh, I sure hope not.*

“Chantelle, what if we cast the gold into coins with enigmatic writing on them. We could put some obscure language on them, maybe Moldovan, for instance. We could sell them at the higher-end jewelers – not at the tents on the corners.”

“Hey, I like that idea.” She smiled.

And, guess where we can get a coin mold, auriferous maven?” *I’ll use that word in my novel.*

“Let me take a wild guess – ebay?”

“You got it. We can get them for less than thirty dollars all day long on ebay.” *He must be on ebay forty hours a week. Wait, that would cut into his porno time. Ah, maybe he’s not like that. I should stop thinking that all he does is look at naked chicks getting banged in strange settings.*

"What else would we need? You can't melt gold in a saucepan, can you?"

"No, you can't. You melt it in little graphite vessels called crucibles. They look like large thimbles, but without any holes, of course."

"Well, I guess all we need is some crucibles and a butane torch." *Crucible – now there's the word for this whole golden dilemma.*

"We can get the crucibles off of ebay." *Why, of course! Where else would we get them?*

"Are they expensive?"

"No, Chantelle; they're not very expensive – under fifteen dollars. And, Home Zone sells butane torches. I think Wally World does, too."

"What should we do first, Mr. Mold Gold?" *What in the world! How does she come up with these terms?*

"I'm going to order a dozen crucibles on e-bay right now. I've got to go back to Raleigh tomorrow, Chantelle. I'll buy a torch up there. I'll try to take the week after next completely off. Are you free that week?"

"As a matter of fact, I am." *Now.*

“Cool beans. You can hold onto the smaller gold fillet if you want, if you think you can keep it well-hidden. If not, I’ll just take both of them back to Raleigh.” *Of course I’m going to keep one, sly dog.*

“Oh, I know just the place to hide it.” *I bet you do.*

They looked at each other and smiled. They had the gold. They had a plan. They had trust. Or, so they sincerely hoped.

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Chantelle fell asleep on her side in David’s arms at 12:32 AM. David awoke with the morning wood at 8:08 AM. Chantelle felt it, and quickly took care of it.

“You sure know how to make a man feel good, Chantelle.”

“A man?” *Gosh, men can say the dumbest things.*

“Your man.” David felt that his recovery was adequate.

Chantelle shook her head and smiled. *Men!*

They took their gold fillets out to their cars and slid one under each passenger-side front seat. David actually took the smaller one. They triple-checked their car locks.

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They had Sunday brunch together at a little bistro about a block away on Dock Street. They muted their newfound excitement. It was a challenge to contain their elation.

"I can hardly believe that we really have *it* in our possession," David said to Chantelle at a low volume, while chewing on a garlic bagel.

"I know. It's been quite a quest. Thanks so much for including me. I never dreamed that this could happen to me. Such an unbelievable stroke of good fortune. David, you have no idea how poor we were in Haiti. We were almost too poor to even dream."

"Well, I really think that I may have made a wrong turn without you. I like your perspective; you see things that I miss. We're a perfect pair – a golden duo." *Nice, David. Very nice.*

Chantelle felt a flood of warm blood flushing through her cheeks' capillaries; he had made her blush. *What a charmer. Yes, what a charmer my boy is!*

"Thanks," she said, almost sobbing. "Thanks so very much, David. You're such a nice guy." *My ex might not agree with that assessment. / I hope he doesn't leave me.*

David put a twenty-dollar bill on the table and they got up to leave the restaurant. There were a few other patrons in the bistro. A snobbish-looking, white-as-milk, older, fat lady stared at them. David looked back at her and licked his lips. She was thoroughly ruffled.

They walked back to the inn with coffee cups in hand. Neither spoke. They were still quite stunned: They had over a million dollars in gold. It was them; they had won the gold quest. Their ticket had the winning numbers in raised gold.

The sun was now shining on the old brick buildings like it had done for over a hundred years, but it seemed almost magical at this very instance, as David glanced up at them, noticing the green moss on the mortar joints. *Could any of the deceased people who once inhabited that old building have imagined me here today? Ah, the crazy things I think. / He seems lost in thought. What is he thinking? He wouldn't kill me at this point, would he? I think he really does love me.*

Chantelle's mind was then back in Carrefour, Haiti – the slums where she and her brother played with just an aluminum can when they were six and four. She recalled the flies and mosquitoes in that unrelenting, humid, Caribbean heat; the horribly disfigured and diseased victims everywhere; all the impending death and general misfortune. *America has been like another life. I feel it going into overdrive now. It's unreal!*

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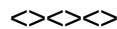
Back at the inn's parking lot, next to her 2006 silver VW Beetle, Chantelle kissed David on the lips. She felt a tingle run up her spine. It was love. *I love my golden boy.*

David hugged her tight, and then let Chantelle get in her car. "Be a good girl. Keep it in a safe place. There are no do-overs

if you lose it. These gold nuggets are not insured.” David stated his warning to her just like a football coach reminding his star running back not to fumble in the red zone.

“You do the same, mon chéri. [‘my darling’ (masculine) in French] I’ll see you in eight days. Stay safe. I love you.” *Wow, she said it. And, I think I can believe it.*

“Je t’aime,” [‘I love you’ in French] David said as she slid past him. *Wow, he really loves me.*



David’s drive back to Raleigh was largely uneventful. There were some cops directing traffic around a multi-vehicle wreck near Benson, but the traffic never totally stopped. He was in his Kittrell Drive driveway at 1:11 PM.

He placed his black-bagged golden fillet under his bed and took a nap. He was out for three and a half hours. He dreamed of living on top of a mountain of pure gold.

In the dream there was just Chantelle and him. Not only was the mountain they lived on made of gold, but so were many objects in their palatial home. There was a gold lamp in the main foyer, a pair of gold toothbrushes in the second-floor bathroom, a gold stereo in the den, a gold analog clock on the main living-room wall, and gold televisions with gold-toned images on the screens.

What wasn't made of gold was gold in color. Gold cumulus clouds slowly wafted by. Golden birds effortlessly glided on the gold-dust breeze. The sidewalks were gilded. The earth was gold-hued. The halls were covered with golden wallpaper. Gold-colored carpet, rugs, drapes, and furniture coverings abounded.

Later in the dream, they applied gold-leaf cream on each other – all over their arms, legs, torsos and faces. And, yes, Chantelle even coated his sausage. They literally became the golden couple.

It was a golden life. And, it was never going to end.

Chapter 38

Cindy Santos was back in the Channel 8 News studio on Princess Street at 1:09 PM, editing a script for an update of Dale Smite's murder. She had already been informed by the Wilmington Police Department that nothing of significant value or interest had turned up in the early morning search of the back yard at 2393 Van Buren Street, even though metal detectors, ground-penetrating radar, and dogs had been used. *I wonder if David found his treasure last night. Maybe I'll send him a text.*

She got out her primary cell phone and typed:

Hope you got what you were looking
for last night. All the best, Cindy

The air conditioner was humming away as she depressed the Send key. It was another hot, mega-muggy, late June day. The *humidosphere*, she heard the weekend meteorologist call it. On days like this she missed cool and perennially foggy Daly City. But, she didn't miss the earthquake risk.

She recalled a strong temblor while in high school. She was terrified. Ceiling tiles fell down. A bookcase fell over and hit her teacher, breaking her leg. She vividly recalled everyone screaming and crying. As the class huddled under tables, her scared-for-her-life best friend told her, "I just know that we're all going to die."

Her parents had also told her about massive earthquakes in Manila, and how they leveled whole shantytowns. She could

deal with the heat, the humidity, the severe thunderstorms, as well as the not-that-infrequent tornado and occasional hurricane threats. However, the unannounced nature of earthquakes scared the bejesus out of her.

As she was putting the finishing touches on her script, her cell phone chirped. It was a text message from David; it read:

I did. Thanks so much. I'll tell you more in ten days. I have a gift for you. – David

Ten days? Why can't he just tell me now? Gosh, I have to go a week and a half in suspense. A gift? Wow. I wonder what it could be.

She texted him back:

Ok, mystery-gift man, I'll be waiting. Don't forget me.

Within two minutes, David replied:

I won't. Trust me.

Cindy made the final revisions to the script, read it to herself silently, then recorded it for the voiceover, and left the studio. She was back at her condo at 1:54 PM. Storm clouds were billowing to the west. The front's leading winds were already creating small whitecaps on the river.

She opened the balcony door, leaving the screen door in place. She then curled up in her round, brown-framed, pink-

cushioned Papasan chair that she had brought with her from Daly City, and watched the storm approach. It was one of her favorite things to do. It made her feel so refreshed. Her mind would always have such interesting thoughts, almost from some other world, she felt. Maybe it was all of the negative ions whirling about.

The sky grew grayer and darker. She could see the curtain of rain approaching. The west winds became stronger with gusts over forty-five miles per hour. People vacated the river boardwalk and Water Street. A piece of wax paper was whipped high into the air, spiraled around, and then sailed over a nearby four-story building.

A storm-induced reverie began as Cindy saw the first lightning bolt touch down off in the distance in Brunswick County. *I wonder how much gold David found in Dale's back yard. How did he retrieve it? I guess he had a metal detector. How did he get in the back yard without being seen? Did someone help him? Will he kick back some of his treasure to me for the priceless tip that I gave him? I wonder how deep the river is in the middle. I wonder if I could still swim it. I'd hate to attempt it now. Aren't there alligators alongside the battleship? Swimming in that river is a death wish, girl. I wonder how big David's utin [penis in Filipino] is. I bet it would fill my buto [vagina in Filipino] perfectly. Wow, I'd like to have wild sex with him in a storm, just like this one. I bet he fucks like a wild boar. But, I'm in the local spotlight as a TV reporter. Everyone seems to have seen me in this town. I can't go anywhere without being recognized. I knew this went with the territory. I liked the notoriety at first; now, I thoroughly hate it. In fact, I'm*

*ready to pay someone to do my grocery shopping for me.
Yeah, I should call one of those services tomorrow.*

A raindrop hit her forehead. She got up and closed the balcony door. A lone seagull was perched on her black railing, getting drenched. *Poor bird. You can fly, but you're always outside. No easy life there.*

Chapter 39

During the next week, David would call and text Chantelle, usually four or five times a day. Of course he was always concerned about the larger *fillet d' or* ('golden fillet' in French), as he code-named it in the texts and calls. She told him that she just left the slender, black-bagged gold nugget right where he placed it. She felt it was safest there – in her car – as her roommates often went through her room, just as she did theirs. Additionally, she had placed an old, brown, bath towel on top of the black bag.

The week actually passed fairly quickly. Chantelle got her vacation to start on Sunday, July 8th, but she was only able to get three days off, not the whole week. She wondered: *Should I just ditch this job now? No, not yet; I don't have any cash flowing out of that golden boomerang just yet. It's still just a curved, yellowish, heavy-ass rock.*

After working the first shift on Saturday, she left for Raleigh, right from the Monkey Junction Super Wally World parking lot at 4:08 PM. She had packed for the trip the night before; her cerise suitcase was in the back seat. She reached under the passenger seat as she rolled out of her parking space; the gold had not been stolen. *Dieu merci, il est toujours là. [Thank God, it's still there.] in French]*

As she headed north-northwest on I-40 West through the virtually flat lowlands of pine stands and crop farms of eastern North Carolina, her mind drifted like a texting motorist. *This should be an interesting few days. Very exciting. I'm driving*

right through the pages of my future novel. I just hope he doesn't drug me, tie me up, and keep me as his sex slave. No, he's not like that. Well, if he tied me to the bed and ... mmmm ... Just me and David in his house. Maybe one day I'll live with him as his wife. That would be so nice. Oh, I am getting way ahead of things. I bet that he'll use the money from the gold to pay off his mortgage. Wait, that might look suspicious. I think they're watching him. Maybe me, too. Who knows? I need to play it cool, too. Maybe he will just sell his house and move somewhere else. I guess I will find out his future intentions over the next few days. Can't wait to have sex with him on his bed. Going to wear his rod out. I'll reduce his staff to a smoldering nub. His balls will be sore for days. Going to go super-freaky on my bone boy. I wonder how big his bed is. Probably a king size. I can't wait to experience the gold-melting and mold-pouring procedure. This should be fun and informative. I'll use it in my novel. For sure.

Chantelle pulled off at Exit 303. The sign read: Jone's Sausage Road. *Bone's sausage*. She chuckled to herself.

Her throat was parched. She drove to Burger Thing and got a strawberry smoothie at the drive-thru. It hit all the dry spots, even froze her brain for eight seconds. *Youch!*

She composed a text to David before leaving the parking lot; it read:

I'm only 11 miles away. Get ready, loverboy. I hope you took your blue pills. xoxox

Chapter 40

David heard three, rapid, loud knocks on his front door at 10:08 AM on an ultra-bright, warm-but-rapidly-becoming-roasting-hot Saturday morning. *Is Chantelle already here? Did she call in sick? I thought that she couldn't miss work today.*

He looked through the peephole. It was the UPS guy. He had a small, light-brown package for him. He signed for it and closed the door. *What could this be?*

The return-address label was the giveaway. It was the dozen graphite crucibles that he ordered off of ebay last Sunday. *Yey! Earlier than expected.*

After carefully opening the cardboard box, David held the miniature, handle-less, pot-like objects in his right hand. *I've already got the torch, tongs, ingot molds, and coin molds. So, why not do a test run? Chantelle won't be here until after six. Yeah, that way I can perfect my technique and impress her.*

He brought the box of crucibles up to his half-finished attic storeroom. One side of his attic was finished: it was his office, and when/if he got married, it would be his man cave. The side that he was on still had non-drywalled studs. There was a louver at the end wall that let in fresh air. He would use it as an exhaust vent.

David had a 2' x 3' metal table under the louvered vent with an extendable lamp overhead. This was to be the operating table; this is where he would melt small chunks of the

elongated nuggets, and then pour the molten gold liquid into the coin and ingot molds; yes, this is where marketable conversion would occur.

The unfinished attic area was already getting hot. He switched on the large, commercial-grade floor fan, aiming it at the louvered vent. He left the door to the office open so that the cooler, air-conditioned air could be drawn into the work area.

David now had his golden fillet up on the table, along with the molds, torch, tongs, an electronic postage scale, a couple of chisels and a hammer.

Before firing up the torch, he took a photo of the semi-sacred gold fillet. *This pic could get me in trouble someday, but I want to be able to remember what this beauty looked like. I'll move the pic off the camera later to a secret flash drive and hide it.*

After taking a pic of the gold nugget while weighing it on the scale (it weighed exactly 16 pounds, 7.11 ounces; the readout was in the photo), he grabbed the half-inch-wide chisel in his left hand and the short-arm hammer in his right hand. He paused for a second, realizing that once he struck the gold fillet, its pristine beauty – and ultimate high value – would be forever lost. But, he had debts to retire and projects to start, and could see no other way. And, even though you got free meals and lodging in jail, the caged life just didn't interest him.

<thud> The chisel easily sliced into the pure gold. He picked off a small curved piece and put it in a crucible. He fired up the torch and ran the flame over the top of the gold,

occasionally bringing the fire perpendicular to the gold shaving. It soon melted. He grasped the crucible with the steel tongs and poured the molten gold into a one-ounce ingot mold. *Wow, I never imagined that I'd be pouring gold ingots at any time in my life. Never.*

He repeated the process twenty-two more times before taking a break. David now had twenty-three one-ounce ingots of pure gold solidifying in front of him. At \$1,500 an ounce, he was looking at \$34,500 right under his nose. *Boy, that was quick and easy. Good work if you can get it. Wait 'til Chantelle sees this.*

After David ate a turkey-and-Swiss sandwich for lunch downstairs, he returned and poured twenty-two two-ounce coins. The molds were some odd lot off of ebay from some guy in Romania. They had strange, cryptic designs and words in Romanian like *noroc* (luck), *bucurie* (joy), and *dragoste* (love). They also had the inscription: Au 99.99 fine. This is what sealed the deal with David. If a metallurgist tested one of their gold coins and it came up less than 99.99% pure gold, he would gladly refund the money, take it back, and re-melt it. He felt fairly confident the gold fillets were gold through and through; he saw no impurities in the solid form or in the molten pour. And, his supposition was correct. Both were essentially pure specimens.

He watched as the twenty-two gold coins cooled. Another \$66,000 dollars. Combined with the twenty-three ingots, he had cracked the \$100,000-dollar mark. *Take this job and love it. Certainly.*

He shut off the torch, turned off the fan and light, and went downstairs. *I'll let those babies cool in peace.* He glanced at the digital satellite clock over the fireplace; it was 3:03 PM. *Three hours until her sexiness arrives.*

He went to his bedroom, took off his shoes, and took a nap. He had a dream that he was living in another gold house – a house literally made entirely out of gold.

However, in this dream there was a villain who always seemed to be in a black mist, had a super-sized oxy-acetylene torch, and was always extorting money from him, which he paid by chipping off pieces of his house. He resented it, and was always thinking up a scheme to have him eliminated. It was maddening.

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At 6:36 PM he awoke to someone lightly knocking on his front door. *That's got to be Chantelle!*

He jumped up and answered the door in his bare feet.

"Hello there, pretty lady."

"Hello, golden boy," Chantelle said with a French-Spanish smile as wide as Hispaniola. "Nice house. Might I come in?"

"Why, of course. I guess that I got lost in your mesmerizing beauty, girlfriend." David had zoned-out on the zigzag pattern of black stripes on her red, mid-thigh-length dress.

“Oh boyfriend, you just want a blow job. I know you. I know your balls are blue and as tight as piano strings. C’mon, let Chantelle see that proud, ivory, tube steak.”

As the front door shut, Chantelle went to her knees and unzipped David’s jeans. She pulled down his dark-blue, speedo-style briefs, and David’s half-hard kielbasa sausage flopped out.

“Nice donger, dude,” Chantelle said in an affected, over-the-top, Southern-California-sounding dialect. “I remember that bulk of bologna. Yes, sir, I do.” *Bulk of bologna? She’s on her game ... again. Where did she hear a [San Fernando] Valley accent? Oh, wow ... Here we go again. Woah!*

“You’re too much, Chantelle. Where do you <gulp> come up with <gulp> this stuff?”

“Just relax, my love; you’re getting all flustered,” Chantelle said as she took a momentary break from her felatio of felicity. *He’s really loving this, I can tell.*

David just shut up and enjoyed it. *Man, she is good. Bryan Ferry was right: Love is the drug.*

After six minutes of all variations of lip slides and tongue licks, he could take no more. When the tip of his wonder worm touched Chantelle’s left tonsil, he erupted. He shot his man lava straight down her throat. He convulsed hard five times. Chantelle took it all without missing a single beat. She literally

drained him. When she was done, there was no need for him to go to the bathroom. His urethra was completely cleared and as clean as a polished whistle.

“Well, that was one hell of an entrance, my fair lady. How much do I owe you?” David asked in a ludicrously transactional tone.

“Oh, I’ll get sweet payback later. I’m going to ride you to market and back.” *Woah! Where did I put that Viagra pill?*

“Ok, I hear ya, princess. Are you hungry?”

“I just inhaled a cream-filled, American, one-eyed steak,” Chantelle said while laughing. *Wow! What a description.*

“I heard that. Well, we’re off to a great start. Let’s ride it all the way to victory lane. Hey, is the gold still in your car, under the passenger seat?”

“Uh, something happened, David.” Chantelle looked so very sad, simply pitiful, as she bowed her head down. *Is something amiss? Have the gods turned against me again? Has something gone horribly wrong? Is that why she gave me that fantastic blowjob? Was it to soften my rage at what she is about to tell me?*

“What happened? Did someone steal the gold?!” Blood was draining out of David’s face; he was turning white.

She looked back up at him with a big smile. "Gotcha!" *She certainly did ... once again.*

David breathed a sigh of relief. "You scared the hell out of me."

"Relax, it's right where you left it. I put a towel over it to hide the plastic bag."

"Excellent. Great thinking. You're one smart, sexy, young lady."

"Thanks. It's so nice to hear that, David. No one has ever said that to me."

"Oh, come on now."

"No, really. Just you."

"Well, I mean it, princess. Say, is your car unlocked?"

"Absolutely not." *I wouldn't leave that car unlocked for a second. Where's his brain? Down there again, I'm sure.*

"Can I borrow your keys?"

"Will you be back by ten?" Chantelle asked, trying to sound like a concerned mom.

"Ok, you sure are in a funny way this evening." *She's in a great mood. This is going to be a great few days.*

Chantelle gave David the keys to her car. He went outside and spritely retrieved the gold-filled plastic bag with the towel around it, and came back inside. He then handed the keys back to Chantelle while grinning hysterically, feeling higher than an over-inflated weather balloon.

"I'll be back in just a minute. In fact, why don't you come up with me?" David then motioned for her to follow him up a flight of wooden steps.

"Is that where you finally kill me?" She looked up the stairway. "In your attic." Chantelle put on the mock-frightened face.

"Will you stop that? I am not ever going to harm you. Wait, let's reverse this. I haven't strip-searched you yet. I bet this is where you off me – in my own house. And then, you drive back to Wilmington with all the gold for yourself. Did I guess it correctly?"

Chantelle just frowned at him. Then they walked up to the attic storeroom, Chantelle behind David. *I love that white-boy ass.*

Once inside the sweltering storeroom, David laid down the larger gold fillet near the scale and switched on the lamp. Chantelle's eyes were wide open.

"Wow, you've already started," Chantelle said while staring at the line of gold ingots.

"Yeah, the crucibles came this morning and I already had the other items. I was anxious to get started. It's really not that

hard. We can start again tomorrow morning. It's too hot up here now. The air conditioning from my office and the floor fan can't keep this area cool after two o'clock. The attic is coolest around eight in the morning."

"Eight sounds great!"

"I've heard that line somewhere," David said with his lips pushed out, looking like an over-animated duck.

"Stop, you're quacking me up, David," Chantelle said with a laugh that emanated from somewhere in the Greater Antilles.

"You must be hungry," David said while making his way back down the stairs.

Chantelle followed him. "Yes, I guess I could go for a few solid-carbohydrate calories after those liquid-protein ones. But, just a few."

"Don't worry, skinny girl; you won't get fat."

They walked into the kitchen. David leaned against the countertop, next to the sink. Chantelle took up residence next to the stainless-steel stove. She studied it.

"Nice range, dude. We could just eat here," Chantelle suggested, as if she had had a moment of Eureka!

"We could. I have plenty of food in the fridge and freezer. But, don't you want to show off your dress in a restaurant?"

"I only want to show off my dress to you, David."

"Thanks. I feel so honored and so lucky, sweetie." David walked over and kissed her on the lips. Their tongues searched each other's mouths. Their hands began to wander. David suddenly stopped.

"What's wrong?" Chantelle asked, quite surprised.

"Let's cook and eat now, so I can eat you all night. I need some calories, too, doll." *Doll? That was sweet.*

"Ok, sure. No problem, bone boy." *Bone boy? Where did she come up with that? I'm not 'that' thin.*

"You certainly have a way with the English language, Chantelle."

"Do you like my phrases?"

"I love them. Don't stop. I love your linguistic creativity. You're going to be an awesome writer someday, Chantelle."

"Berci moucoup, sonmieur." [dyslexic French for 'Thank you very much, mister.']

"Scrambled Français?"

"Yes, oui, sí." [yes in French; yes in Spanish] Yes, we see(?)

“Ok, stop it; you’re killing me,” Chantelle said as she raised her right hand.

They both laughed and began to cook a baked ziti dish. Chantelle grabbed an assortment of spices from David’s wooden rack.

“We are gonna make it manje kreyòl [Haitian creole] style, mon ami,” Chantelle announced while sprinkling various peppers, thyme, parsley, garlic and green onions into the sauce.

“Sounds good to me, girlfriend.” *Wow, he called me ‘girlfriend’ again. I love that.*

Soon they were devouring the delicious Haitian-spiced pasta dish. They split a bottle of Chianti.

“Do you feel different now, Chantelle?”

“A little tipsy-toodle,” she replied while rocking her head.

David laughed. “No, I mean do you feel different knowing that you will soon have over five hundred thousand dollars to play with?”

“Not really. I guess that it hasn’t hit me yet.” *But, it’s very close.*

“What do you plan on doing with the money, boyfriend?” *Ah, very nice, Chantelle. Sounds genuine.*

"I really just want to be mortgage-free with no car payment. I hate being in debt to anyone for any amount. I'll put some of it in safe investments. Maybe use some for a bio-tech project. I'll actually hide most of it in this house. It won't earn any interest, but at least it's where I can get to it fast, and where the government or some lawyer can't get at it. I'll keep my lab-tech gig, unless it starts to drive me nuts. I won't be going on some big spending spree or world tour. I won't be buying a Maserati or a Ferrari. That's just not me. Plus, it's really not *that* much money when you divide it out over thirty years. Lottery winners often squander away much higher amounts in less than five years." *Good, he's not going to be foolish.*

"Very astute, David."

"Well, what about you, sexy lady?"

"Well, I'd buy a modest house for my mother in Wilmington. Or, maybe a small condo, as she's too old to maintain a yard. I'd give some to my brother to help him pay for college."

"You are very generous. I like that. How would you like to finish school at Cape Fear and then live here? Or, how about transfer to Wake Tech right now?"

"Are you asking me to move in with you, hip-star?" *Hip star? She's nonstop.*

"I guess I am, mademoiselle," ['an unmarried lady' in French] David said as he tilted his head towards her.

“Could I write my novel in your upstairs office?”

“Absolutely. I’ll stay out of your way. I know that writers need space – time alone. I know that it’s a solitary craft.”

“Well, that seems like an offer this girl can’t refuse.”

“You could even transfer to the Super Wally World off Wake Forest Road – until you become famous – it’s only three miles from the house.”

“You’re making this decision so easy.”

“Why make it hard?”

“Why, I’ll make it hard.” She winked at him.

David picked her up and brought her into the main bedroom and laid her down on his king size, cherry-framed bed. *King size, I knew it.*

Foreplay was first and foremost. The dark-green bedspread was almost off the bed from all the angling, repositioning, and sliding.

David quickly erected a taut mast. His Viagra-fortified, non-collapsible tower was ready to go the distance. *Bring it on, sexy lady. I’m all set for a long sail.*

Chantelle condom-wrapped it, licked it, and slid her wet glove down on it. She rode him fast and hard, pounding his gonads

with such a wild abandon that they would still ache the next day ... and the next.

After eighteen minutes of full-throttle, shaft-sliding action, she slowed down and looked into his eyes. "You took a pill, didn't you? Don't lie to me, sausage dog." *Sausage dog? Ha!*

David smiled. *I knew he took something for his penis.*

"Well, I'm still going to outlast you, sportsy," Chantelle said as she went into overdrive. Seven minutes later, David couldn't hold it any longer. When he thought of a boring July baseball game, all he saw was an October World Series game, ending with a walk-off grand slam. It felt like he emitted a quart; he just hoped he didn't rupture his latex-torpedo balloon.

After an exquisite post-coital nap, replete with dreams of floating golden faeries and impossible C-shaped golden mountain peaks, David went to the bathroom to remove his condom. There was blood on it. He was shocked. He removed it and went back to the bed.

He gently grabbed Chantelle's right shoulder and shook it lightly. "Honey, honey ..."

She looked at him, still not fully awake. *Huh? Where am I?*

"Chantelle, are you ok? You're not hemorrhaging are you? I found blood on my condom."

“No, it’s not that, my silly American loverboy. You just helped start my period, menstrual maestro.” *Menstrual maestro? I can’t wait to read her novel.*

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David awoke first at 6:46 AM. He looked over at Chantelle. She was sleeping so peacefully. He imagined her sleeping in her hut in Haiti. Then he noticed that she had entered a rapid-eye-movement phase. *What is she dreaming? If only I could know. If only ...*

He started a pot of coffee in the kitchen. He found a bag of onion-and-garlic bagels and warmed one in the microwave. *I’ll just let her sleep. It’s the first day of her period. She’s not going to feel like doing much.*

Chantelle entered the kitchen in a white bath robe at 7:17 AM. She was rubbing her eyes as she spied David.

“Good morning, stranger,” she said as she grabbed the maroon cup that David had set out for her. She poured herself some dark, black coffee and stirred in some raw-off-the-cane brown sugar.

“No cream?” David asked.

“No, your crème de la bitte [‘penis cream’ (semen) in French] is enough for me.”

“You never miss an opening, do you, Chantelle?”

“Did you miss my opening last week?” *Yow!*

“Absolutely.” *Hell yes! / I know he did.*

“Ok, how many times did you whack off to my Facebook pics? It had better be a high number, mister.” *Woah!*

David just laughed. She was like no other female he had ever known. “Even more than that,” he finally blurted out to make her happy, hoping the topic would go away.

“When do we go into production?” she asked.

“Are you ready now, dear?”

“First shift clocking in at the gold lab, sir.”

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In the attic storeroom, they were all business. They cranked out forty-four more one-ounce ingots and thirty-two two-ounce coins by noon.

“That should be enough for today, Chantelle. Thanks for all the help. We’ll start up again at eight o’clock tomorrow.”

“Are the ones from yesterday cool enough to touch?” Chantelle asked, just to be safe.

“They are. Go ahead and grab a few to take back to Wilmington. Try to sell one at one of those ‘we buy gold’ outfits.”

“Should I start with a coin or ingot?”

“Try to sell a coin first. Tell them that it’s a rare coin from Romania, exact origin and minting date unknown. Tell them that a friend got it in Europe and gave it to you as a gift.” *For what?*

“You think that’s the best route?”

“I do, based on what we know at this point. Heck, you may even get more than the going ounce rate. They may fall in love with the mysterious inscriptions on the coins; it may seduce the potential buyers. Tell them that you heard that the coin has a strange history. Embellish a tale. Pique their interest. Who knows? Next, try to sell an ingot at another jeweler or gold-buying outlet. When they ask where the gold in the ingot came from, just say that it came from a creek in the piedmont area, somewhere near Charlotte. Most jewelers in this state know that there was a lot of gold found in and around Charlotte. You won’t even be lying, most likely. Then compare your results. Just remember not to try to sell more than one bar on the initial visit.”

“Sell it in Wilmington? Are you kidding? I bet the police have already alerted the pawn shops, jewelers, and all other gold-buying businesses.” *She’s right. Again.*

“Wow, great point, Chantelle. I swear I’d be under the jail by now if not for you. You’re worth your weight in gold. Ok, triple that amount.”

“You mean, I’d be under the jail with you right now, if I didn’t think this through for us.”

“You’re right, you’re right. We can’t sell it in Wilmington or anywhere else in New Hanover County.” David thought for a few seconds about cities within a hundred miles of Raleigh.

“I hear your gears clanking.”

“Is my thinking that loud?” He smiled.

“It looks like you may need some lube on your periscope,” Chantelle said as she turned in her seat and grappled his package and began to orally service his account. She gave him another fantastic lip-sliding tongue lashing that he’d come to expect. *Man, I’m so spoiled by her.*

Right when he was ready to burst, it came to him as it came to her.

“Fayetteville!” David exclaimed five nanoseconds after climax. “That large army base – Fort Bragg – is there. The soldiers are always bringing back coins and precious-metal trinkets from overseas for their significant others. When they find out that they’ve become insignificant others while abroad, they hock these items in the plethora of pawn shops that dot this town like chicken pox.”

“Fayetteville?” Chantelle asked while wiping her lips.

“Yes, that’s the town to hit, Chantelle. We’ll try our first sale in Fayetteville. They are used to seeing foreign gold coins and all kinds of gold ingot shapes. And, they’re quite accustomed to not knowing where the hell it came from or its purity. They’ve probably got metallurgists on call. Heck, most of them probably can test the gold’s purity themselves with electronic devices.”

“When do you want to go, Mr. Goldseller?” *She never stops.*

“Let’s knock off early tomorrow. We can have the smaller fillet finished by eleven-thirty and leave at noon. It’s only sixty-nine miles away. We could be there in just over an hour if traffic isn’t too bad.” *Sixty-nine miles? What a map freak he is. But, they’ll be no 69-ing on this outing. No, not this time. Bloody, bloody. My red river flows heavily. I can feel it. I’ll keep his pecker massaged. I’ll make certain that he’ll never want to be without me.*

“Sounds like a plan, my main man.” *What did she just say? Am I just her golden option?*

“Is there another guy?” David asked with a stunned look. *Is this where she finally tells me that I’m her number two? Who is my rival? ‘Show me my rival.’ Oh, that Steely Dan song is in my head now.*

“Got you again. David, you are just too easy. C’mon, let me see you smile.” *I always fall right into her mind traps. Thank God we’re on the same team.*

David forced a ridiculous, clown-like smile. “I’m a happy boy. Happy, happy, happy!” *I hope he doesn’t go coo-coo on me. Dear God, don’t let him go mad.*

They wrapped up operations for the day and went back downstairs. They had now poured more than \$300,000 worth of virtually pure gold into various molds. All was going well. They were both very content, knocking on ecstatic. *This is going better than I ever could have imagined. / This poor Haitian girl sure has found the American dream – the golden American dream.*

David didn’t even care that Chantelle was having her period during her visit to see him; he already preferred her oral service. He was addicted to her mouth: He loved the sage words that came off her tongue and he loved the other thing it could do, too.

They rented a romance-suspense movie and ate in again. They had a glass of wine after dinner. Chantelle, who had taken a Pamprin, was out like a lamb by 10:10 PM. *My girl sure was tired.*

David started feeling anxious about tomorrow’s trip to Fayetteville. He kept looking at the old popcorn stucco ceiling until he saw patterns and letters. It was a cheap thrill that his mind had grown to love. Popcorn stucco ceilings always did

this for him, ever since that peyote trip in the New River Gorge area of West Virginia ten years ago. The stucco ceiling in that cheap motel room off US 19 in Beckley seemed to be a sublime work of abstract art. It was like some astral hieroglyphic. There was a hyper-message in it. It was etched into his brain. He never looked at popcorn stucco ceilings the same way after that.

At 11:11 David's mind gave in to the rising tide of sleep. It was a wave-less, deep azure, white-foam-striated, sea of tranquility.

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The Tuesday morning routine was quite similar to the day before. Though, Chantelle suffered a minor, first-degree burn on her right index finger when she touched a tong that had not yet cooled. David got her some antiseptic dressing and a Band-Aid. He gave her a white, oblong Percocet that he had left over from a tooth extraction with a glass of Chardonnay. After forty-five minutes, Chantelle didn't even know that she had been burned.

They completely finished melting down and casting the smaller golden fillet into molds. The sixteen pound, seven-ounce nugget had been converted into 88 two-ounce coins and 87 one-ounce cube ingots.

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They were out of the driveway in the trunk-door-replaced Ford Focus at 11:11 AM. Most of the journey was interstate travel (I-40 East and I-95 South). They were quiet, both wondering how this would go.

They took Exit 56 for I-95 Business into Fayetteville.

“Well, here we go,” David announced as if they had just crossed the fabled Rubicon River. “I think we’ll be ok. At least we’re not in a murdered person’s back yard at night with a metal detector and a shovel.”

“Yeah, David, we can do this. I’ll take one coin in.” Chantelle looked at the large, weighty, gold coin. *Please be a magic coin! Please.*

“Good deal, Chantelle. Text me with an asterisk if I shouldn’t come back and pick you up.”

“What? You’re going to drop me off and leave?” *What a scaredy cat!*

“You’ll do fine. The only thing I could do is bring unwanted suspicion and screw it up.” *Gosh, he’s so paranoid and anxious. Yeah, he might, indeed, screw it up.*

“Ok, fine; I’ll go in alone.” *Good. I know that she’ll do better than me in there. And, the two of us in there ... no ... why, we might blurt out contradictory statements.*

Soon they were on Bragg Boulevard. They spotted a gold-buying pawn shop on the right. They pulled into the parking lot. Chantelle got out with the gold coin in her purse.

“Wish me luck,” she requested as she started to walk towards the store’s front door. *How difficult is it going to be converting these gold objects into cold, hard, green cash?*

“You can do it, sweetie; you’ll do just fine,” David affirmed. *Nice vote of confidence. He’s so supportive. Well, of course he is – I’m his rock-to-cash conversion agent. / I sure hope that she does ok in there. Should I go in with her? No. Stick with the plan.*

David pulled out of the gravel lot, kicking up some dust. He began to cruise further up Bragg Boulevard, looking for other possible gold-sale spots.

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The man behind the jewelry counter looked very battle-hardened. Chantelle noticed deep creases in his face and fingers. There was a nasty scar on his right wrist. He had a silver crew cut with a streak of missing hair on the right side, just above his ear. *Is that where he got slashed with a knife?*

“How may I help you, miss?” he asked while looking down at some papers on the glass display case.

"I'd like to sell a gold coin that a friend got while he was in Europe. It's been kept in a safe. No one has handled it." She then handed the man the coin.

The no-nonsense-tolerated man behind the counter carefully examined it. Then he performed some tests on it with electricity and some chemical solution. It took less than two minutes. When he was through, he placed the unique coin on an electronic scale. He then looked up at Chantelle.

"Well, it's damn near 100% pure gold, ma'am. It weighs 2.03 ounces. How much do you want for it?"

Chantelle knew from the financial website that she had referenced earlier that the morning gold fix was \$1,538 an ounce. "How about three thousand?"

"You got it. Deal. Just fill out this card. I'll need to see some ID, too." *That was easy.*

"Ok, thanks, sir."

Chantelle filled out the little index card with her name, address, and phone number. She returned it to the veteran pawnshopper. [*sic*] *Hope this is sufficient.*

He then cursorily checked her driver's license. He nodded. Then he threw the index card in a box.

“Would you have any more of these coins by chance, miss?” he asked, seeming extremely interested in procuring many more.

“I actually have nine more. Could you buy that many?”

“I most certainly can. Just bring them all in and I’ll pay you in cash. Thirty thousand dollars. I’ll give you three hundred C-notes in a brown bag. Just be careful. I’ll cut you a check if you’d like, but then, I’ll only pay you twenty-nine thousand four hundred dollars.” *A six-hundred-dollar deduction?! A 2% check fee?! This guy is crooked as hell. I just hope that the money isn’t counterfeit. Please, not that.*

“That’s ok. I’ll just take cash.”

“The hundred-dollar bills are straight from the bank – crisp, uncirculated, and still in the wrappers.”

“Ok, I’ll be right back.”

Chantelle walked outside and called David. It was already very hot outside. She looked for some shade and walked to the north side of the building.

“So, how did it go in there?” David asked in a low, hushed voice.

“It’s going good. Great, in fact. No problem at all. Très facile. [‘very easy’ in French] He’ll buy nine more coins for a total of thirty thousand dollars in brown-bagged cash.”

"Excellent. I'm just one minute from the lot." *Wow! Girl done good! VERY good! So glad that I met her. What were the chances? Why am I always thinking about probabilities?*

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Chantelle went back into the pawn shop with nine more gold coins in her purse. She placed them in a 3 x 3 square on the display case top. *I wonder where she really got these coins. Hope they're not stolen. No police alert about them. I think I'm ok. They're pure gold. I can resell them for \$3,300 each, easy.*

The man, his name was Ed, tested and weighed the nine gold coins. They all passed muster. He then told her that he would be right back with her money. He disappeared behind some swinging doors. *Gosh, did he just run out the back door with our gold coins? No, he's the real owner, I can tell. He'll be back ... to kill me? Stop thinking such things, Chantelle. Relax, girl.*

Five minutes later Ed emerged with a brown bag. He told her that it had been counted twice by his currency-counting machine, and that it was always accurate for the past three years. Moreover, the sale went down without a hitch, or a glitch.

She exited the store and sat in David's car with the brown sack of cash on her lap. *Wow, I did it! I didn't slip up.*

"Guess what's in here?" she asked him while laughing.

"A lot of loot, I hope," David said while pulling out of the dusty gravel lot.

Once they were back on I-95 Business, Chantelle opened the brown bag. David saw stacks of machine-wrapped, one-hundred-dollar bills. *Wow, we finally converted some of this gold into cash. I was beginning to wonder if it was even possible. Goodbye car payment. I'll let Chantelle take half of it back with her; she has certainly earned it. I just hope that she doesn't go wild in the mall. People raised in poverty usually make horrible financial decisions once they have money. And, I need to remember to mail a gold coin to Cindy. I doubt we would have anything if it weren't for her tip.*

"A lot of green in here, golden boy," Chantelle said with a big smile. *No shit! Holy cow!*

"Wow, we're in the money at last! Great work, Chantelle. We'll count it at my house. You can have half of it. I'm going to pay off my car loan. I really don't know if I would've gotten this far without you." *You wouldn't have, loverboy.*

"Thanks so much, David. I'm really at a loss for words."

She then leaned over and planted a big kiss on his right cheek. *Life aint so bad ... aint so bad at all.*

"Well, we're now at a point where fools get caught. Don't deposit any of it in your banking account. And, don't make any outlandish purchases." *Does he really think I'm that stupid?*

“Don’t worry. I’m going to do the same thing. I owe about four thousand dollars on my car. I’ll pay it off with several money orders. I’ll buy some basic necessities for my mom and brother.”

“So smart. Wait, you mean you’re not going to buy sixty pairs of shoes at the mall?”

“Very funny, David.” She gave him a mocking laugh that sounded like a goat being strangled.

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They were back in David’s driveway at 2:12 PM. It was another July scorcher in the Capital City. *Damn, it feels even hotter than Fayetteville.* (David had heard that, on average, Fayetteville is the hottest city in North Carolina.)

David carried the brown bag of cash into the house. They counted the C-notes in the living room with the blinds and curtains closed. There were exactly 300 neatly wrapped one-hundred-dollar bills.

“So, is this where you kill me and cut up my body into three-inch pieces?” Chantelle asked with a dry expression. *Why does she keep thinking that I’m going to kill her? Do I have a homicidal look on my face?*

“Will you stop that? You’re giving me ideas. You know what? I’ve changed my mind. Yep, I want it all for myself.”

David gave her a deadpan expression. Chantelle fell for it.

“What do you mean, David?” She was getting scared.

“Gotcha back, sexy butt!” David announced and started to laugh. *That bastard got me good! Does he only think my rump is sexy? What about my boobs?*

“Touché. You got me there, Mister Hard Dog.” *Mister Hard Dog. She’s too much.*

David placed \$15,000 back in the brown bag and handed it to Chantelle. “Be smart, girlfriend.”

“I will. Trust me.” *I guess I must at this point.*

“There’s another military town close to Wilmington – but not in New Hanover County – that slipped my mind before. Oh, what is it?”

“Jacksonville?” Chantelle blurted out.

“You got it! That’s it – the home of Camp Lejeune. It’s in Onslow County. Fifty-one miles northeast of your house.” David recited this while looking at his smartphone. “It’s the Marines version of Fayetteville. How would you like to try your hand at selling some gold ingots there?”

“Sure. Why not? Sounds like a lucrative part-time job.” *Very lucrative.*

David dashed upstairs and brought down twenty, little, one-ounce golden cubes in a small cardboard box and handed it to Chantelle.

“Thanks so much, David. You really trust me.”

“I really have no choice at this point, ma belle. We’re indelibly linked to each other by this gold now.”

“Would you like to stay linked to me forever?” *She still seems to have a hint of doubt about me really loving her. / I hope he does.*

“Certainly, princess. Absolutely. Listen, I feel kind of grungy from the summer scum. I’m going to take a quick shower. Feel free to eat and drink anything you find in the kitchen.”

“Thanks, boyfriend.” *I like how she says that.*

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David got in the shower and began scrubbing off the hot day’s grime. All of a sudden he felt a hand on his semi-flaccid schlong. He looked down and saw Chantelle’s thin, black, left-hand fingers on his rapidly swelling member. *Oh, boy, here we go again. I’m going to erotically miss her when she goes back to Wilmington. It’s been like living a gold-medal porno fantasy.*

Chantelle was crouched down beside the tub basin. Her narrow left arm wrapped around the translucent clear shower curtain. David smiled at her as she stroked his distended salami. *He's loving this, I can tell. Look at that face! He's going to miss me when I'm gone. I hope he doesn't replace me. No, he won't; he can't now.*

When David was just seconds away from eruption, he turned toward Chantelle. She placed her face up against the clear plastic shower curtain just as David emitted his silver stream onto the ten-mil-thick barrier between them. It was like they had the whole act choreographed. *She's better than I could have ever imagined. / I'm going to make him forget about those porn sites.*

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After talking for a few more hours about all kinds of scenarios and strategies for gold-to-cash conversion, Chantelle gathered her things, including the cash bag and the ingot box, and got in her car to leave. She looked at the clock on her dashboard; it was 6:46 PM. She had to work the next day. *Do I really want to work at Wally World anymore? Well, I'll at least give them notice. I'll ponder this on the drive back to Wilmington.*

"I've had a most propitious – and, yes, you can use that word in your novel – time with you, Chantelle," David said as he stood beside her in the driveway. "I've thoroughly loved every minute of it. Please drive safely. Stay smart. Call or text me when you get back."

“You sound like a concerned father talking to his teenage daughter,” Chantelle replied. *Her dad died when she was still a toddler. She never knew him. Does she look at me as some kind of father figure? We’re both in our twenties. I’m less than seven years older than her. / He really cares about me. Why, of course he does. Cha-ching!*

“Well, I’m concerned about you, girlfriend.” He leaned in the car and kissed her. *Gosh, he is such a nice guy. He’s so different from my ex. So very different. I love my golden boy.*

She said, “Je t’aime, mon chéri,” [‘I love you, my darling’ in French] and then turned her head to drive. She shifted into reverse and eased the clutch out.

David watched as she backed out of the driveway. She waved and blew him a kiss as she passed by his front lawn. Her silver VW Beetle made a left turn ... and she was gone. *Wow, I picked the perfect accomplice. Couldn’t have done better. / I’m so glad that he came through my checkout line.*

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At 9:09 PM he got a text while looking at the remaining coins and ingots. It was from Chantelle; it read:

Back safe and sound. All is ok.
Feel tired. May go to sleep early.
I love you, Chantelle

He immediately replied back:

Great to hear, girlfriend.
Be careful. Talk to you
tomorrow evening. I love
you, too, and already
miss your sexiness.
xoxox, David

David was eyes-shut by eleven o'clock. He dreamed they were living together on some island in the Pacific Ocean. It wasn't hot; it wasn't tropical. The temperatures were very mild. Chantelle was typing her novel in a very small font on thin sheets of gold. They were in some Escher-like impossible structure. It was so surreal. It was so cool.

Chapter 41

Cindy was in her condo, watching the seagulls and eating her frozen pasta dinner in her living room as a thick-aired night fell over the river and the swamplands to the west, when David leapt on her ever-swerving thought train. *Wow, I forgot to tell David about Gerald. I'll text him. Hope his girlfriend is cool with it. No complaints so far. Does he have a girlfriend in Raleigh?*

Cindy got out her smartphone. She texted David:

Gerald finally started talking.
He said that he killed Dale in
self-defense. Can you believe
that? Three shots to the face.
That's self-defense? Crazy, huh?
Hope all is going well. – Cindy

She flipped her flat-screen TV on to channel 8 at 8:59 PM. She liked to monitor the news teasers that were placed just before the nine and ten o'clock hours. She wondered if they were going to run hers. Sure enough, they did. It was about street-flooding issues near Greenfield Park. *My cheeks look too pink. I overdid it with the blush. Darn it!*

Cindy was very critical of her on-camera appearance; she always thought that she could look better on screen. The curse of the pretty female.

At 9:05 PM, while listening to some tracks by the Pinoy wunderkind, Blackbird Blackbird, on YouTube, she heard her phone chirp. It was a text from David, which read:

Thanks for the update!
Yeah, Gerald's going to
hang himself with that
story. Oh, where should
I mail your gift? – David

Cindy read his text twice. Then she thought about the best address. Even though she had already met David, and even though she had a growing crush on him, she knew that she must be careful. She texted him back her PO Box number.

She looked at the Memorial Bridge lights and thought about asking him what he was doing on Saturday. But after typing out the text, she just couldn't hit the Send key. *That would be too forward. It would be like I'm asking him out. I know some American women do that, but I'm just not comfortable doing it. Well, not yet. Maybe it's just better to text each other about Dale Smite's murder and the supposed treasure in his back yard. Just let things evolve naturally; don't try to accelerate anything. I bet the mystery gift is a piece of that treasure trove. I can't wait to open that package when it arrives.*

She switched to a playlist by Natural Calamity. There was a star twinkling by itself in the western sky. *Will anyone in my family see that lonely star in three hours? I wonder how they are doing in Daly City. Gosh, I haven't called them in two weeks.*

She gave her mom a call. They were all doing ok. No big news. Her dad sounded a little weaker. *I wish he'd stop smoking!*

After she hung up, she found the *Dive* album by Tycho on a YouTube playlist. It got her mind going. *What a strange life this is. Almost feels like we're the entertainment for some alien civilization. We're all probably already on some higher life form's monitors. Earth is not even worthy of a takeover. Wow, I may have a science-fiction story here. I need to start writing these ideas down. Where's that sharpened pencil?*

She fell asleep on her Papasan chair with a yellow, no. 2 pencil in her left hand. She often crashed in the bowl-shaped chair. It felt like she was in some primordial egg. She felt safe and secure in the half-cocoon.

She soon drifted off into a dream. In the dream, there was a grayish asteroid headed towards Earth, and David's face was on it! She was signaling to him. She didn't want the Eiffel tower to stick him in the right eye. He was smiling back to her. The David-asteroid never impacted Earth. The scene strangely merged into a large, celestial, cereal bowl of stars. She was going to say, "Hey, I got your Milky Way" ... but the scene shifted again. It was all black. And, it was all silent.

Chapter 42

It was another triple-H (hot, hazy, humid) July afternoon in Raleigh on Friday the 13th, when David got a call from Chantelle. He was grilling some tempeh burgers on his back patio, while trying to extract a Kamikaze gnat from his left eye.

“Hello, what’s up, sexcretary?” *[sic]*

“Good news, loverboy.”

“Lay it on me.” *I sure hope that he hasn’t laid his sausage in any skank while I’ve been away.*

“Oh, I’ll be laying it on you alright, come Sunday.”

“I heard that.” *Can hardly wait.*

“David, you won’t believe it. The twenty gold ingots – well, your sly girl has already sold them all.” *My girl is something else. Out of this world. Boy, did I strike gold with her.*

“Wow! That’s amazing, Chantelle! Excellent work, girlfriend.”
Yey! He still calls me ‘girlfriend’!

“I got fifteen hundred fifty dollars an ounce at two different places this morning on US 17 in Jacksonville. I used my fake ID at one joint; the other one didn’t even ask me to fill out an information card.” *A fake ID?*

"You got thirty-one thousand dollars in cash?" *Does he have a calculator in his hand? Or, something else.*

"I did. And, get this, boyfriend: I've already spent it all on coke." *Oh, no! Don't tell me that she's a cokehead. No!*

"What?! Are you addicted to cocaine?!" David screamed so loud that the neighbors could have heard him. "Tell me the truth, Chantelle."

"Gotcha again, Mr. Gullible." Chantelle was giggling. *She sure did. I never stop walking right into here snares.*

"Yes, you certainly did." David was now laughing, too. "So, one place accepted your fake ID, and the other place didn't even have you fill out an info card. What's the name of the latter?" *F-F/L-L: Former = first; latter = last.*

"Buffalo Bob's Gun and Gold on North Marine Boulevard."

"Thanks, girlfriend. That's our kind of place. Let's try to move some more gold through that outlet. How did the guy seem?"

"He seemed crooked as hell to tell you the truth. A fat, white guy in his late 50s. Nearly bald. A big, bushy, gray mustache that almost appeared to have hair spray on it. He was always looking up at me over his bifocal glasses as he sat on a metal stool. He kept rubbing his eyebrows."

"Ah, he knows tropical beauty when he sees it. Did you fuck him?" *What?!*

“Of course not! I wasn’t even flirting with him.”

“I didn’t say you were. Gotcha!” *He sure did.*

“Touché.” Chantelle recomposed herself after David’s zinger.

“He didn’t even give me a receipt. He asked me if I had more to sell. I told him that I might in the near future.”

“Perfect. Look no further – and drive no further: We’ve found our one-stop gold launderer.”

“I’ll bring the money up to you this Sunday morning. I have Sunday and Monday off.”

“Keep sixteen thousand for yourself. Just bring fifteen thousand.”

“Why do I get more?”

“Mileage allowance. And, you’re doing the hard work now.”
Hard work? This is a piece of cake.

“Ah, thanks, mon chéri. You are such a generous boyfriend. I love you!”

“De rien, ma chérie.” [French for ‘You’re welcome, my darling.’]

“You’re learning French just for me. I love that!”

“Well, juste un peu. [‘just a little’ in French] Don’t expect too much. Foreign languages were never my strong suit.”

“Your birthday suit is more than enough, boyfriend.”

David chuckled. “You certainly have a way with English words – already. Your birthday suit is bolt-up trop chaude.” [‘too hot’ in French]

“Still have both hands on your phone, goldenrod?”
Goldenrod? Ha!

“Do you?” David chuckled. “Listen, my veggie hockey pucks are done. Hang on a sec while I walk in the house.”

“You can still walk? Ok, I’ll be right here.”

David chuckled as he used the old spatula that his father had given him to flip his cultured soy burgers onto the plate. He shut the grill down and walked back into the house, parking himself in the kitchen.

“Ok, I’m back.”

“What are you wearing?” Chantelle asked in a lascivious, deliberately provocative voice.

“Will you stop that? I’m trying to eat.”

“Would you like to eat me?” *Always.*

"You know that I would, my prurient princess." *Prurient? Another one for the novel.*

"Ok, I'll let you eat in peace."

"Merci, mademoiselle." ['Thanks, miss' in French]

"Oh, David, me and some friends are thinking of going out tonight. A good friend wants us to hear him DJ at a small club downtown. What do you think?"

"Sure, go out and have some fun. Go! Just be careful. Remember that it's Friday the 13th. Don't let the boogeyman get ya." *Boogeyman? I'll have to look that up later.*

"Oh, yeah, it is, isn't it? I forgot about that. Well, don't worry, babe. Yours is the only liverwurst locomotive going in my love tunnel." *Liverwurst locomotive? How does she come up with this stuff?*

"I trust you, sweetie." *I guess.* "Go out and enjoy the night. Call me tomorrow. Don't worry about me." *I'm not; you can't screw an image on a computer screen. Or, does he have some expensive call girl coming over tonight? I need to stop thinking these ruinous thoughts. But, I just can't.*

"What will you be doing, love hound? Will you be ordering up a couple of escorts? A pair of sexy bimbos for a measly three thousand dollars? Fucking them 'til dawn while on Viagra?" *What?! Why does she think such things?*

“Oh, give me a freaking break, Chantelle! Really? You know I’m not like that. I’m addicted to your thing, and your thing only.” *I know you are, boyfriend. He passed the test.*

“My thing. You like the happy clapping, don’t you, David? I saw it in your eyes. Admit it.” *Her female mind – something else.*

“Especially in three-part harmony.” *Maybe that will change the topic.*

“I’ll let you get a towel now, bone boy. Talk to you tomorrow. Je t’aime.” *Bone boy? Again.*

“Be careful in the club. I love you, too. Goodnight, gorgeous girlfriend.” *Wow, he thinks I’m gorgeous. That will be the highlight of the night.*

David terminated the phone call. He looked out the kitchen window towards the backyard. A hot dusk descended on the North Carolina piedmont. The insect cacophony was running at full volume now. He thought he saw a barn owl in his red maple tree, but on second glance he wasn’t sure what it was. His right hand brushed against the window pane. It was hot to the touch. *It’s been one hot-ass summer so far. The A/C is getting quite a workout.*

He imagined Chantelle negotiating the gold sales in Jacksonville. *Wow, she’s something else. Such mettle. Such savvy. Way ahead of her years. And, so trustworthy. But, why did she already have a fake ID? When did she get it? Why did*

she get it? Probably to be able to get into bars with her of-legal-age friends. Yeah, probably just to buy alcohol and hang out with the older ones in her group. Very common. Hell, I had one, too. But, didn't she say that there were some issues regarding her residency status? Was she caught using a fake ID? Is Chantelle LaMer really her name? I love her, but damn, sometimes she feels like a double agent. Has she told anyone else about the gold? She is so smooth – too smooth? Has she done this kind of thing before somewhere? Oh, why do I think such thoughts? She's one fine lass with a sexy ass, a razor-sharp mind, and a heart of gold – now, almost literally. I guess these damn sleeping pills are making me paranoid.

David grabbed an IPA (India Pale Ale) from the fridge. He then switched the TV on. It was one of those gold-prospecting shows. *Those poor bastards have to go out and sweat all day, digging up dirt and smashing rocks. Sometimes they work a whole day for just five or six dollars in gold dust. They also often go broke trying to find it. All I had to do was lift two thin golden boomerangs out of thirty inches of soft, loose sand. Total cost: less than twenty dollars for a spade and gasoline for Chantelle's car. You can have the notoriety, boys. I'd much rather be comfortably invisible.*

Before the bottle was three-fourths empty, he was asleep on the couch. It had been a long day at the lab. Consciousness quietly conceded.

His snoring seemed to control the air conditioning: When he would start to snore, the A/C would kick back on. This would be the observation of a lone fly on the wall above his head.

He dreamed about Chantelle. She was out at a club with her friends, but for some reason it wasn't in Wilmington. In fact, he didn't recognize the city. She was in some place that he had never been. Everyone in the club was staring at Chantelle and whispering behind her back. Their stares were like syringe needles, trying to pierce her facial skin. They seemed to be scheming and plotting against her. He heard the malicious whispering but couldn't make out the words. He was powerless to do anything as he was locked in a room with a tiny horizontal-slit view of the club scene below. He watched as a Bengal tiger slowly entered the bar. He feared the worst. However, it turned into an oversize, blue-tailed skink, and slowly disappeared into a floor register. He looked askance to find an older Asian lady wagging her finger at him. He awoke in a cold sweat. *These dreams are going to be my downfall.*

Chapter 43

It was ten o'clock Friday night in Wilmington – the 13th of July, 2012. Chantelle began getting ready to go out to Pumpers Lounge on Nutt Street with two of her best friends, Leeza and Monique. She was rummaging through her clothes searching for the right look. *Must not wear anything too risqué. I'm not trying to get a boyfriend; I already have one. A good one. The golden one.*

She had already given her mom and brother three thousand dollars each. She had told them that a generous, old, white-haired lady had come through her checkout line and felt sorry for her for some reason. She told them that when she said that she was from Haiti, it must have struck a sympathy nerve, as the hunched-over lady must have assumed the worst – abject poverty to the max. The sweet, elderly, presumably-well-off lady immediately got out her checkbook. Her mother and brother seemed to have believed the fabrication.

While looking at herself in the mirror, Chantelle thought about how the night might go. *Now, don't make yourself look too sexy, girl. You don't want every Dong, Dick, and Hairy asking you out.* She even thought about cancelling. But soon, the girls were knocking on the door.

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The club scene was not too intense. The guys were surprisingly not poon-craving animals on this hot and sultry Friday night. In fact, it was quite laidback. The music was

reggae-infused trip-hop. The patronage had a nice racial mix. All was transpiring in swells – no breaking waves.

When a big black guy asked her if she would like a drink, she politely declined and told him that she and her friends would soon be leaving. He didn't seem too put out by it. They had been there for two hours already. She had been sipping mineral water the whole time. She didn't mind being the designated driver this time; she already had what she wanted.

Her two female friends were a little tipsy, but not severely plowed. She ushered them into her silver VW Beetle and drove them home. They would make arrangements to get their cars tomorrow afternoon – after their hangovers abated.

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She was headed south on 16th Street, slowing down for the red light at Castle Street when thoughts of David filled her mind. *When I get home, I'll call him. He'll like that. I don't want to attempt a text while driving. Too many cops out now. Even though hardly anyone ever gets busted for texting while driving, it would just be my luck.*

The light turned green. Chantelle began to make the right turn as if by second nature. She suddenly saw a speeding, dark-colored vehicle out of the corner of her left eye.

<CRASH!> A black, red-light-running, Lincoln Navigator slammed right into her door at 44 MPH.

Chapter 44

Saturday, July 14th was the first dry day in two weeks. The dew point was only 53°F at 1:11 PM. A Canadian cold front had pushed all the way to the Carolina coast overnight, somewhat of a rarity for summer.

David had been piddling around the house doing sundry yard projects with one, big, C-shaped idea on his mind: the large fillet of gold – how best to safely convert it into maximum cash. But when he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and didn't see any messages from Chantelle – neither text nor voice – his mind quickly refocused on her.

He called her number. It went to voicemail. He left a brief message. Then he left her a short text message that read:

Missing you, girlfriend.
Hope everything is ok.
Love you, David

He then went back inside to check his computer for any e-mail messages. Nothing. No updates on her Facebook page in the past thirty-six hours – nothing since they changed their relationship status and listed each other as boyfriend-girlfriend.

He was flummoxed and getting flustered. *Is she ok? Has something bad happened to her?*

He wasn't sure what he was going to do next when his cell phone suddenly rang. The call was from Cindy Santos.

"Hello David, I'm so sorry about Chantelle." *Oh, dear, the tone of her voice sounds so grave.*

"Why? What happened to her, Cindy?"

"You don't know?" *I'm surprised he doesn't know already.*

"No. I just tried to call her – no answer."

"Well, you better steady yourself."

"Ok, I'm holding the wall up."

"She died last night. Her car was hit by a drunk driver who ran a stoplight on Castle Street." *No! Goddammit! No way! How could this happen? What are the chances? Fucking dumb-ass drunk driver. Too damn stupid to call a cab, take a bus, or walk. Ma belle is gone.*

"No, no, no. No!" David gasped and then sobbed. *Tragedy always wins out in the end. Love is just the bait. Ecstasy is merely a fleeting phase, an impairment to make one stupid to life's cruel realities. I should've known that something terrible was going to happen. Things were going too good. Way too good. The gods always get even ... and go ahead to win again. The good life is just a fiendish tease for people like us.*

"I'm so very sorry, David," Cindy continued. "I saw that you two were in a relationship from your Facebook page. Since you live in Raleigh, I wasn't sure if anyone had told you, or if

you would've checked the Wilmington local news. And, I didn't know if Chantelle's mother had your phone number yet."

"No, Cindy, no one had told me. This is a major kick in the gut, to say the least – a crippling blow to the heart, soul and psyche. It feels so unreal. I can't believe that she's dead. She was something very special, extra-special – a very keen, lovely, young lady. Chantelle was my incredibly incisive teammate and lover. *Was? My lord, she's really gone. Forever. I'll never see that smile again or hear another clever coinage uttered from her lovely lips. Why go on?*

"I know it's hard, David. Sometimes life doesn't seem fair." *Sometimes?*

"She wanted to be a novelist, Cindy. She was always taking notes. I loved that about her so much. I loved her wit and her way with English words and phrases. I'm crushed. Devastated. All the sweet memories. She's already haunting me, and probably always will. God, I am going to miss her so very, very much. I still can't believe this."

"I certainly understand, David. As you know, she had a unique last name for eastern North Carolina. When I saw her surname in the overnight deaths, I couldn't believe it. I had to check it twice. Once again, I am so deeply sorry for your loss, and to be the bringer of such terrible news."

"Well, I appreciate you calling me, Cindy. I may not have found out for days what had happened. I'm going to just sit back and

take this in. Try to figure out what I do now. Try to figure why I should wake up tomorrow.”

“Please don’t do anything drastic, David. I’m here if you need to talk.”

“Thanks, Cindy,” David said with a distraught look of utter despair on his face for the blue jay perched on the window sill. “Thanks a lot.” He ended the call.

He went out the front door and walked over to the park. He sat on an old concrete bench next to the creek. He thought about the future together with Chantelle that now would never be. He composed a response in his mind: *Oh, sweet life, you are one nefarious, capricious, depraved, maniacal son of a bitch! I never believed in you. Not once. Ever. Never did. Not even close. Even when things were going so well, even when things were so exquisitely harmonious, even when I thought we were properly paying our pauper dues, even before I discovered the gold under that spare tire in the trunk of that forsaken car, in the back of my mind I knew you could – and most assuredly would – pull this card – the king of calamity – out of your devious deck. So, yes, I’m saddened. Grief-stricken for sure. But, no, not really surprised by such a usurpation of joy. You see, I always knew you were capable of bestowing such misfortune. I’m down, though not plucked of all pluck. Ha, I knew all of you gods were just bitter old sods. Worthless bastards who are probably getting revenge on the living just for sport. Envious of us for what we had, and what lay ahead. Especially since you lived such deplorably miserable lives prior. So, this I thinketh to you in the singular,*

plural, and even in between: Fuck off in a most metaphysical way! He was surprised by his can of Rant-O-Roni.

The creek just gurgled. A crow indifferently screeched. A dog barked in the distance. David wiped his eyes.

He then got up and started walking back towards his house. David stopped and looked at his white Ford Focus in the driveway, focusing on the trunk door. *What a strangely exciting – and now devastatingly heart-crushing – odyssey this has been.*

He turned his head and looked down the street. A cyclist with an orange jersey pedaled northeast on Kittrell Drive, turned left on Overbrook Drive, and was gone. *That guy must have a twin. He must. That or he's just an optical delusion – a sure sign that my sanity is sailing away.*

Chapter 45

Chantelle's memorial service was on Tuesday, July 17th at 2:00 PM. David got the day off and attended. It was a very small affair in a small chapel on South 14th Street in Wilmington with just her mother, brother, and about a dozen close friends.

At the conclusion, upon walking back to his car, Chantelle's brother, Louis, stopped to talk to David.

"She told me about you, David. I know she would have wanted you to have this." Louis handed David a green, plastic-covered, spiral notebook.

"Thanks. What is this?" David was too grief-stricken to make the connection.

"These are the notes for her first novel. She told me that she told you about it."

"Oh, yes, yes ... on many occasions, Louis. You know, she was always taking notes."

"Well, when you read through it, you will see your name often. She really loved you." *Another stab in the heart from the gods above.*

"Thanks so much, Louis. Thanks so very much. I remember her talking about this many times. I will treasure this forever."

"It's no problem, mon ami."

"I hope you and your mother can recover and move on with your lives. I'm not sure if I can."

"We will in time, David. We Haitians are used to tragedy. We are used to people dying early." *Used to people dying early. Jeez, what a thing to be used to.*

"She was an amazing lady with a generous heart and a great mind. I'll never forget your sister, Louis. Never."

"Thanks for being so nice to her. She said that no man ever treated her so kindly and respected her so much."

"Gosh, Louis, you're going to make me cry again."

They hugged each other. Louis' mother came over. David hugged her, too.

"I am so very sorry, Mrs. LaMer," David said softly.

"My daughter is in perfect peace now, David. We will grieve, but we will be happy knowing that she has already safely arrived at her final heavenly destination."

David looked at Louis. "Louis, could you give me your mailing address? I want to send you something."

“Sure.” Louis wrote the address down on the back of one of Chantelle’s memorial-service pamphlets and handed it to David.

“Thanks. Keep an eye on your mailbox.” (David would soon be sending him and his mom six gold coins.)

They said their sad goodbyes. David looked at Louis and Mrs. LaMer as he drove off, raising his left hand, but we couldn’t even wave. *I hope they’ll be ok. Will I be ok?*

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David exited Wilmington, driving north on US 17 in a state of numbing sadness. Sorrow permeated his whole being. He was morbidly melancholic. He felt like the car was a casket in autopilot mode. *Should I really even bother doing this? This soon? Just after Chantelle’s funeral? Well, I could see her wanting me to keep going. I can hear her laughing. ‘Now, don’t you fuck this up, bone boy!’*

He decided to stop in at Buffalo Bob’s in Jacksonville. Soon he was in front of the man that Chantelle had described to him. *Well, that’s definitely him. Here goes.*

“What can I help you with, sir?” the shop owner asked while sitting behind a jewelry display case, reading the local newspaper.

“I have some one-ounce gold ingots that I am looking to sell,” David announced. *I hope this works.*

“Sure. Show me what ya got.”

David placed a small cardboard box on the glass counter and opened it, displaying a 4 x 3 arrangement of a dozen gold cubes.

The owner then stood up to take a closer look. “Why, these look like the same ones that I bought last week. Let me just do some quick tests for purity.” The owner grabbed the box and put it on his little table behind the display case.

“Sure. No problem.”

“Do you know a young, black female named Marie? I bought ten of these, exactly-the-same, one-ounce cubes from a Marie last Thursday.” *Marie? Ah, Chantelle used a false name. I’m going to miss her wily wit.*

“Yes, I do. Marie was, I mean is, a very good friend.” *Gosh, I hope my brain-dead slip-up didn’t tip him off to something being fishy. / Something’s afoul here.*

“Did you two have a fight while splitting up the spoils?” *What the hell did he just ask me? Oh, just calm down.*

“No, nothing like that.”

“I sure would love to know what Charlotte creek you found the gold pellets in.” He chuckled. “But, I know that’s your little secret.” *Chantelle must have told him some story.*

David offered a short, nervous chuckle. "Yeah, I think we need to keep that to ourselves for the time being."

The owner laughed. "I'm sure you do."

David watched as he performed a series of tests on a few of the gold cubes. *Please come up pure. At least 99.9%.*

"These cubes are ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-nine percent pure gold. They are some of the best gold ingots I've seen come through here in a long, long time. Will fifteen-twenty an ounce suffice, sir?"

"Certainly. Deal."

"You want it in cash, or as a check? A check will cost you three hundred sixty-five dollars." *He doesn't want the sale traced. And neither do I. Perfect. He's just as my dear Chantelle described: crooked as a fish hook.*

"In that case, I'll take it all in cash." *Just like Marie.*

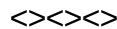
"Ok, just give me a minute."

He then walked away with the gold and disappeared into the back of the shop. Five minutes later he returned with a brown-paper grocery bag, which he handed to David at the counter.

"There ya go, pal. Eighteen thousand, three hundred dollars. That's 183 United States Treasury C-notes. I even threw in an

extra sixty dollars. Trust me, it's all there. My currency counter never misses a note. If you have any more to sell, come back in about three weeks. I'll need a little bit of time to resell it and build up my vault again." *Chantelle was right: This guy is totally under the radar. The perfect buyer.*

"Ok, will do," David said as he walked out of the store with the brown-paper sack under his right arm. *Do I sense a red laser dot on the back of my head? I guess it's just first-time bullion-sale paranoia.*



David was back in his house on Kittrell Drive with his paper bag of loot and Chantelle's green notebook two hours later. It was 6:06 PM. *What a day. How I wish Chantelle were still alive. How I wish she were here right now. I wish I could buy her life back from the gods with this golden cash. How I wish I could sever the finality of her absence.*

He looked at the wrapped hundred-dollar bills. *Success, but such a hollow victory. I would trade it all just to have her back – alive – in my arms. I already miss her smile, her sensuous kisses, her skinny legs, her bony fingers, her devilishly erotic ways. Gosh, if there's really a God, I'm sure that I'll pay for that thought somewhere down the line.*

David put the sack of cash to the side and picked up Chantelle's notebook. He started to thumb through the pages. He read her notes for her first novel. He noticed that her description of the male protagonist was very much like him.

Wow, that's me! She was going to use me as the main male character. I was the star! It's all too heartbreaking.

He continued to read notes on various places. He saw a section with a heading of *Adjectives to Use*. Many of the words that she had heard him use were listed. When he read the word *disconsolate*, a tear fell on the page, causing Chantelle's red-felt-tipped pen's ink to run. *What is this life about? It's all ultimately sorrow, isn't it? Brief island-moments of joy, only to be submerged once again in a sea of sorrow. Inescapable heartbreak and tragedy. When and where do I meet my pitfall? Ah, who the hell cares?! I don't give a damn what happens to me anymore. Bring it! Gimme your best shot. I'm right here waiting. Are you chicken? C'mon, take me out right now. What are you afraid of, Zeus? Do it. Chuck a lightning bolt at me. Make it two. Make it ten! Are you scared, Yahweh? ... or, just waiting for an unsuspecting moment to completely annihilate my psyche? I can tell; I'm going to go mad.*

Chapter 46

It was a stiflingly hot Friday the 20th. Cindy was glad not to have any plans for the night. It had been a grueling day. A minor freight-train derailment in Leland. A small fire at the port. A new mixed-use development planned for downtown. Her red dress had become sweat-saturated.

After a much-needed shower, she logged into her Facebook account and sent David a short message, which read:

Hope you're doing ok.
I got the gift last Monday.
Thanks so much!
Oh, Gerald got a lawyer;
he's no longer talking.
Well, just checking in.
Take care of yourself.
~ Cindy

David happened to be on Facebook in his Raleigh home at the same time. He quickly responded with:

Glad you got the gift. I was
beginning to think that it had
been stolen or lost in transit.
Well, it gets a little better each
day. Just takes time, I suppose.
So, Gerald lawyered up and
shut up. So typical. Ha-ha.
I'd love to talk again about

our golden topic. Have a nice weekend. – David

Cindy read it. I knew it; he wants to talk some more with me about his golden quandary. *He's probably already thinking about fucking me. I hope he is. I know he is. He's probably typing with one hand right now. I won't rush him, but I don't want to lose him, either. How many of those gold coins does he have? Will he tell me? He seems comfortable divulging very sensitive information to me. I can tell that he trusts me. Maybe he's loaded with cash now. How rich has he suddenly become? Hmmmm I'm off next Saturday night. Yeah ... that's it*

Cindy returned fire five minutes later.

How would you like to have dinner next Saturday evening, the 28th?
We can compare our golden notes.

Cindy rubbed her hands together and smiled. *Gosh, I just asked a man out. Am I a liberated American woman now?* She found her previous trepidation amusing. She was proud of herself for having enough courage to hit the Enter key.

David saw her message pop up on his screen. He was going crazy in his house the past three nights, looking at pictures of Chantelle over and over again. He was still grieving, feeling as sappy as molasses dripping down a wilted sugar cane stalk on a hot-as-Hades day, just like this one. *I'll never forget Chantelle, but I need a living female to talk to. I can't go on*

talking to a ghost. I need to get out of here before I go completely insane.

Sure. Where do I meet you?

Cindy noted his quick reply. *He's lonely ... or horny. Probably both. Gosh, men are so darn easy to read.* She typed back the place and time.

Engorged on The Walk
8:00 sharp. Don't be late.
See you then. ~ Cindy

Cindy knew that he would probably quickly respond with another question. She wanted to leave it right there for now. She was feeling drowsy. She logged out and put it on Sleep mode. *I'll check my account tomorrow. That's enough for now.*

Cindy fell asleep once again in her favorite piece of furniture: the Papasan chair. She dreamed that she was introducing David to her parents in Daly City. Low-floating, silvery gray clouds were streaming over their heads at an incredible, unearthly speed. Her mom kept smiling at David, and David just kept smiling back. Her dad was asking her how she met this kano (Filipino slang for an American).

In the strange dream, her dad was holding her field microphone, interviewing her. She was tongue-tied. She was trying to hide her gold coins from her parents. One was under each shoe. She tried to stay still, keeping the coins completely covered by the soles of her tall blue platform shoes. But then,

a gust of wind came along and lifted her three feet off the ground. David grabbed her left arm to prevent her from flying away. However, the damage had been done: Her parents had seen the gold coins. They looked at her with such exaggerated consternation. Then a cyclist in an orange jersey rode by, pulling the whole scene away with him; it was being reeled up on his rear wheel's sprocket, like a take-up film reel in an old movie theater.

When Cindy awoke at 6:45 AM, all she would remember is the look on her mother's face ... and the orange-clad cyclist.

Chapter 47

The next week was a little better for David. The loss of Chantelle still reverberated through his brain and ached his inner core, mostly in low-frequency groundswells, but he had a new realization: He really felt that she was content in whatever meta-space her spirit-energy now inhabited. He knew he would see or experience her and all of his dead relatives and deceased friends at some point in time. It would all work out; he was no longer gasping for air at night. He was no longer cursing the gods, calling out the God, or conceding his life to a joyless somber fate. He stopped biting the top knuckle of his right ring finger.

He departed for Wilmington at 8:35 AM on Saturday morning, the 28th of July. When he saw the date on his desk calendar, he remembered what his meteorologist friend had told him: July 22nd through July 28th is statistically the hottest week of the year for most east-of-the-Mississippi US cities. And, today was no anomaly in the Triangle: It was expected to be 103°F at RDU and 99°F in Wilmington. With the humidity figured in, the Port City's heat index was expected to be 109°F. Summer swelter was in full force, cranked up to the max. But, David was more concerned about another kind of heat, and Cindy most certainly had plenty of it.

David wanted to drive around Wilmington and maybe check out a beach before meeting Cindy for dinner. He drove by Dale Smite's house at 10:55 AM. He put a spy-music compilation CD in the stereo's horizontal slot. *You Only Live Twice* started playing as he cruised around feeling like a

wealthy secret agent – like a spy on a mid-Atlantic coastal assignment. *My mission, which I wholeheartedly choose to accept: Investigate all golden facets of the local, hot-as-the-steamy-air, Asian, female TV news reporter. Get her tongue loose with some good booze. You certainly now have the money for it. Schmooze her and ooze her. Drive the point home like the last nail in the devil's coffin. Jeez, what the hell am I thinking?*

He drove by Shipyard Boulevard Auto Salvage at 11:01 AM as *Escape* by The Man from RavCon began to audibly fill his sedan's air space. He looked over his left shoulder. There were no cars parked there. It appeared to be all locked up. *'Gerald, mi amigo, [my friend in Spanish] sales aint so good these days, are they, mate?'*

He looked for – but didn't see – the trunk-door-less white 2011 Ford Focus. *Wow, it looks completely closed. Totally shutdown. Well, that's where I contracted gold fever. God only knows where Mark contracted it. Hope it's not fatal for me, too – at least not for fifty or so years.*

Soon he was on Oleander Drive headed east. David was on Lumina Avenue at Wrightsville Beach at 11:14 AM. He was hungry. He pulled into the Queen Venus parking lot. A multicolored poster taped to the back wall caught his eye: Tom Montefusco plays red-hot blues at The Palm Room, Saturday Night, August 4th. *That looks pretty cool. Darn, I'll miss that one this time.*

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The restaurant was by no means crowded at this early lunch hour. He asked for and got a booth with a tall back. It was very private. He could leisurely write some talking points down for his dinner with Cindy without looking like a food critic or miscellaneous nut-job.

He started to write on the back of a business card while waiting for the waitress to come back with the menu.

Things to remember to ask Cindy:

1. Status of police investigation
2. What do the police think the motive was?
3. Amount of gold she thinks I have
4. Is she dating anyone?

The waitress, a short Latina with a voluptuously curvy body, arrived before he could come up with number five on his list. She glanced down at his note card. *Damn, she's nosy.*

"Are you ready to order?" she brusquely asked.

"Yes," he calmly replied.

"Will Cindy be joining you?" *What the heck? Such a snooper, she is.*

"No, not now. We rendezvous later. She has almost cracked the case. All of our field work is paying off. We're closing in on the Wrightsville Beach jewelry thief." *That should send her brain into a tizzy.*

“Oh, ok.” The look on her face signaled that her mind was caught somewhere between genuine puzzlement and knowing that she was being pranked. She just wasn’t sure which one it was. “Would you like to hear about our lunch specials?”

“Sure.” *Whatever.*

The waitress, Juanita, recited the lunch specials while David feigned interest. When she was finished he looked up, smiled, and said, “I think I’ll just have the seafood chowder and some sweet iced tea.” *Bastardo barato. [‘cheap bastard’ in Spanish]*

The soup was good and so was the tea. It satiated his caloric demand and stabilized his blood-sugar level. He left a 17.17% tip with a Psecret Psociety card under the bill. *This should get her goat. Let’s see if she joins.*

He then exited the restaurant while Juanita was still in the kitchen flirting with the new surfer-dude cook.

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David got back in his car and continued heading north on Lumina Avenue. He still had quite a bit of time to kill; it was only 11:54 AM. He went all the way to the end of the street and turned around in the circle. He stopped for a minute and began to ponder what he could do to pass the time as he watched the sea oats on the sand dunes blowing in the hot breeze. *Maybe I could go jogging at Hugh MacRae Park. No*

way – too damn hot. I'd be a sweaty mess and smell like a wildebeest. Maybe go check out some art downtown. Yeah, that's it: an indoor, air-conditioned activity. That's the no-sweat winner.

He proceeded back towards Wilmington. The Bradley Creek – Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway – drawbridge's leaves were up. He slowed down and waited in line on Harbor Island as a tall-masted sailboat putted through. Then his cell phone rang. It was Cindy.

"Hello," David said, somewhat surprised.

"Just thought I'd let you know that I'll be getting off work earlier than expected. If you want to come down sooner and hang out, that's fine."

"I'm already in the area." *Why did he come down here so early? Is he screwing one of Chantelle's friends already?*

"Oh, where?" *She sure seems very curious.*

"Wrightsville Beach. I just had a light lunch at the Queen Venus. Wish you could've joined me. It's kind of boring eating alone." *Was he really alone?*

"I see. Well, I should be done in an hour. Where do you want to meet?"

"I was thinking of taking in some art in downtown Wilmington. Maybe meet somewhere near Front and Market?"

“That sounds great. I can be at the MetaGallery at one-fifteen. It’s just off that corner. You’ll see it. I believe that it opens at one on Saturdays.”

“Ok, that sounds great. See you then, Cindy.”

“Drive safely.” *Why did she say that? Does she think that I’ve been drinking?*

David continued driving west on Wrightsville Avenue, arriving in front of MetaGallery at 12:17 PM. He parked and walked up to the door. Cindy was right; the art gallery didn’t open until 1:00. *Well, I’ve got almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour to kill. Maybe just stroll around and check out some shops.*

After sampling various boutique businesses, from handmade soaps to aromatherapy candles, he wandered down Quince Alley and came across a funky, little, cool-looking coffee shop called Java Lava. He walked down the concrete entrance steps and took a seat at a small, round table.

The only other person in there was the barista. She was an incredibly tanned brunette. He imagined that she was a student at UNCW who regularly sunbathed in the nude.

He ordered a medium cappuccino and looked for something short to read. There was a folded-up, light-blue piece of literature on the next table. He reached over and seized it. The bold heading at the top of the half-page read:

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory

There was an aerial photo of Wrightsville Beach Island below the heading. And, under it was the title:

Wrightsville Beached

He studied it before opening the pamphlet up. *Wow. I wonder which agent wrote this one. Ah, 33.*

It was a fifteen-hundred-word short story that seemed real then surreal then quite real again. He wasn't sure what parts were pure fiction and what parts were real-life occurrences. It was the perfect time-filler.

Then the barista came over to his table. She noticed him looking at the cover of the small-format short story on the table after he had finished reading it.

"A bizarre story, huh?" she opined, feeling confident that he would agree.

"Yeah, it certainly is. Did you help write it?" *What?*

David's question surprised her. "No, I had no hand in it. Some red-haired guy left that in here last week." *Ah, a Mike van Tryke strike.*

"So, have you joined the Psecret Psociety yet?" David asked, looking at her with an out-of-a-spy-movie expression.

"No, I haven't. What is it all about?" *How to succinctly answer her question?*

"Oh, it's just a loose confederation of surreal intrigue and meta-real mania." *Huh?*

"Surreal? Meta-real? I'd be up for that? Who runs it?"

"Ernie the Earwig."

"Gross! That's his real name?"

"Yep." *Wow, she seems to believe it. / This guy is full of it – full of shit!*

"Does it pay?" *She had to ask.*

"All I ever hear is 'Check's in the mail'. I wouldn't waste time watching your mailbox."

"Well, what do you guys actually do?" *I bet they shoot sex films and call it erotic video art. Probably just an assortment of reprobates.*

"We post cryptic pics, leave surreal clues, and pretend to be a coterie of esoteric, global-to-local, next-game changers." *Yeah, right, dude. Whatever. Lay off the nitrous oxide. Next.*

"A band of modern-day Don Quixotes, it sounds like."

"Cervantes just spun in his grave."

“Like a broken-string gold yo-yo?” *A broken-string ‘gold’ yo-yo? What does she know?*

“You’ve already snagged it,” David proclaimed as he prepared to leave the tiny café. “You’re a preternatural.” *A what?*

She watched him leave as she shook her head. *Another absurd fool. Where do they come from? Where do they go? When will they stop coming in here?!*

Chapter 48

Cindy was back at her condo at 12:56 PM. She retouched her make-up and gave the perfume bottle a few pumps. She was back out the door in her black miniskirt and electric blue blouse at 1:07 PM. She was feeling very confident about her look. *I hope David likes my outfit. I know he will.*

At 1:13 she was approaching MetaGallery on Front Street. When she got to the large, street-front window, she saw David inside studying a piece of lurid, semi-abstract, quasi-surreal artwork. *So, he likes modern art.*

She walked in and tapped on his left shoulder from behind. David quickly whirled his head around, like he thought it was a hit-man.

“Hello there,” David said while recomposing himself. “I believe that we’ve met before.” *Wow, she looks hot!*

“You do look suspiciously familiar.” Cindy played along. *God, I want to ride his pole.*

“Are you familiar with this neo-surreal artist?”

Cindy looked at the strangely nebulous artwork, then looked down at the title card on the wall. “Mike van Tryke ... hmmm ... no, never heard of him. No, wait; I have actually heard of Tryke. His work was mentioned in a novel by Patricia Cornwell. Oh, what was the title? I just read it three months

ago. Ok, I just remembered; it was *Hornet's Nest*. It was set in Charlotte."

"Good memory. I read that one, too."

They then walked over to a wall of radical-symbol ($\sqrt{\quad}$) art by Lepton Neutrino (Steve Holt). They noticed that he was working out of Charlotte, too. *What's the square root of imagination?*

David then walked over to a table that was covered with whimsical mixed-media creations by an artist going under the nom de brosse of Grandé Love. *What a wig-out!*

"It must be the Charlotte Invasion show, Cindy. Another Charlotte-based artist over here."

"Yeah, it must be," Cindy said while looking at the back of David's legs, about fifteen feet away. *I can't wait to feel those limbs in action.*

Cindy rejoined David in the gallery's small lobby. The curator – and presumed owner – just glanced at them from time to time. He seemed to be sending out e-mails and text messages.

"So, why exactly did you come down here so early, David?" *Relax, the female mind often assumes the male is up to the worst.*

"Exactly?" David gave her a teeth-clinched smile.

"Yes, exactly. Don't be evasive, David." *She's definitely a reporter.*

"I just knew that I would be anxious and bored in my house in Raleigh all day, just thinking about our dinner tonight. I thought, might as well get down here before it gets super-hot." *I guess I can believe that. I'll try my best to assume he's innocent of pumping some poday [Filipino slang for vagina] until proven guilty. His facial expressions don't seem to indicate that he's lying. I'll give him a pass for now.*

"Already bored with your treasure?" *Wow, that's right; she's knows about the gold. Remember, you sent her the two gold coins? Where is your mind, boy? Wake up! Stop looking at her breasts – you can't think when you do that. And, she's probably aware that you are staring at them.* She was.

David chuckled lightly. "I think we need to continue this conversation elsewhere. The curator's ears are getting larger by the second."

"How about in my condo?" *Wow!*

David hoped that Cindy didn't notice him swallow his saliva. But, she did. *That sure got his attention.*

"Sure, that sounds great. How far away is it?"

"Just a few blocks away. I walked here."

“Cool. I’ll give you a lift back to your condo.” *I guess it’s safe to get in his car. We’ll be pumping in twenty minutes.*

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They were silent on the short drive. The sexual anticipation was intense. *I hope he brought a condom.*

Cindy led him up to her condo. Once in the living room, David looked out the bay window. The sky was unusually clear for an afternoon in late July. The Cape Fear River was slate blue, and was lazily flowing southward.

“You’ve got an amazing river view here, Cindy. I love it. You scored. It’s a great pad.”

“A great pad? Is it extra-absorbent?” Cindy laughed at her juvenile wordplay joke. David did, too, a second later.

“Let’s just cut to the chase, Cindy. What do you think I have?”

“Two gonads and a seven-inch, white-guy penis.” *Wow! Holy smoke! She wants to get down right now. Where is that condom?* He felt his left-front pocket and was relieved to feel the latex ring.

“Uh, yeah, I have those items, too.” *I’m going to pounce on him. I can tell he’s already firming up his pistol.*

“Let me check to make sure.” *Oh, my dearest demigod!*

As David stood looking out the window, Cindy crouched down below the wainscoting and unzipped his black jeans. He was already partially aroused. She sucked his lollipop like the girls that she had seen on an Asian porn website a few nights ago. *God, he's starting to ooze his gooze. [sic] Tastes great!*

They made it over to her queen-size bed and David satisfactorily performed his manly duties. Cindy loved his maximum pumpage, [sic] replete with much happy-clapping. And, David loved the taste of her *bilat* (vagina in Filipino), and the feel of her soft-yet-firm breasts. He thought about Chantelle for a few seconds while pounding it in Cindy as she kneeled on the edge of the bed, moaning louder and louder. *I think Chantelle would approve. She wouldn't want me to be lonely. If it was reversed, I'd be cool with her hooking up with a cool dude. Oh, why the hell am I even thinking such thoughts? Maybe I've got Mark's disorder: golden insanity.*

After their inaugural sexual romp, Cindy went to the kitchen to make some ice-cube-filled mint tea. David got dressed and took a seat on her blue, floral-patterned sofa. Soon Cindy returned and sat next to him. David loved the sight of her sexy, bronzed legs. *Such a perfect natural tan these Filipinas have. If someone could bottle that tan, they'd be a billionaire from sales in America and Europe.*

"How long have you had this place, Cindy?"

"I got it about a year ago for a bargain price. Thankfully, I didn't buy it *before* the real-estate bubble popped."

“Cool deal. A lot of my friends are upside-down with their mortgages now; they bought in 2006 and 2007, right before the market crashed.”

“Did you like getting upside-down with me?” *Wow, looks like there will be a second round. I need some time, though. At least forty minutes. And, I need to get another condom out of my car. That’s when I’ll bring in the big surprise.*

“I most certainly did, you erotically charged, sexy Filipina.”

“Thanks for reawakening my libido, dodong.” [‘handsome man’ in Filipino]

“Doe dong?”

“A charming male.”

“A male?” *I guess that I’m channeling Chantelle.*

“A sweet, affectionate, kind, endearing male. The man who I am looking at right now.” *She really likes me.*

“That sounds better.” *He wants my thing again. I can feel it.*

Cindy looked out the window. It was becoming a picture of a swampland sauna as the temperatures soared. Heat waves were readily visible.

“The heat and humidity are coming back later today. It will feel just like Manila by the evening.”

“Do you miss the Philippines, Cindy?”

“At times. But, I don’t want to live there. Well, not now. Not for at least thirty years. Maybe when I retire. Making decent money over there is just too hard – too few legitimate opportunities right now. However, after I accumulate a nice nest egg here in the States, I may very well go back. The dollar goes so much farther over there – almost triple, David.”

“What did you think of those gold coins?” *A test question?*

“I love them! Thanks so much, David! And, how many more might the goldsmith have? Relax, it’s just a rhetorical question.” *Not really.*

“It’s a fair question for someone who provided me with gold-medal-winning, time-sensitive, invaluable information one Saturday evening. Let’s just say that I still have to work, but I’m totally debt-free, or soon will be. I already took care of the balance on my car; the house is next.”

“Excellent, David. That’s very smart.”

“I feel that I owe you more than just sixty-three hundred dollars – the approximate value of those coins, based on the Friday gold close.” *Yes, keep going.*

“You didn’t have to give me anything. Really.” *But I’m certainly glad you did.*

"If you didn't throw me that *bone* of advance notice, I wouldn't have anything. Really. It's the truth."

"It's funny how life works in unexpected ways."

"Yes, sometimes very fortunate and sometimes very tragic." He thought about Chantelle. She knew he was.

"When I first met you, I wanted you, David, but you were with Chantelle. I respect relationships. I don't interfere with them. I am very sorry she died. She seemed like a lovely, young lady. I certainly would have wanted us to end up here under different circumstances."

"She would be happy that we are here together. I know it. She would not want me to remain alone the rest of my life chanting Latin psalms while staring at her candle-lit, eight-by-ten-inch photos." *He must have been raised Catholic, too.*

"You paint quite a picture with your words, David."

"Maybe I just channeled her; she wanted to be a novelist. She was always taking notes."

Cindy walked over towards the main window and looked down. A gaggle of canoes were making their way up the languid river.

"I hope that they know which fork to take," she remarked.

"The river splits going upstream, doesn't it?"

"It most certainly does. And, what's weird is that the wider right fork, when viewed going upstream, is actually just the northeast branch of the Cape Fear River; the narrower left side is the Cape Fear River proper. I know this because just last year, some friends and I kayaked up there. We took the right fork thinking it was the main channel of the river. We never saw the oxbow lake that was our turnaround destination, because we were on the wrong side. We paddled for three hours on the wrong channel."

"Sometimes I wish that I hadn't sold my kayaks."

"Well, I guess Mr. Gold Coins has plenty of money to buy many more." *Mr. Gold Coins? Very Chantelle-like.*

"Cindy, please excuse me for a minute. I've got to get something out of my car." *A gun?! Please, not that.*

"Are you going to get a revolver to kill me, now that I know so much?" *What the fuck! Is that why the sex is so good with these women? Do they think I'm mega-rich and just might kill them for sport? Do I really look so unpredictably dangerous? Is there that much latent homicidal drama humming from inside me?*

"I'm going to follow through with Gerald's plan," David said with a suddenly serious expression. "I'm very sorry, Cindy. This is where your story ends."

"What?!" Cindy screamed out of sheer fright. *Oh, no!*

“Gotcha!” David announced and began to chortle.

“You lousy kano! You son of a glitch! *Son of a glitch? Chantelle’s spirit is in the room.*

“You fell for that one, hook, line and sinker, Cindy.” *I sure did. He might be a good actor. Has he taken drama?*

“Yeah, you really got me, David.” She removed her hands from her face and forced a laugh. *I’ll get him back later.*

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David returned two minutes later with a wide, flat, red toolbox in his hand. *Please don’t let there be body parts in there. No fingers. No toes. Please, dear God, no!*

“Would you like to open it?” David asked as he offered the box to Cindy. *Should I?*

“Is something going to jump out at me like a jack-in-the-box?”

“No, nothing like that. But, you may be startled in a good way. Don’t worry; it’s not a prank.”

“Ok. I’m trusting you, David.”

“Hey, I’m trusting you, too. Bigtime.”

Cindy undid the clasp-type locking mechanism and opened the box. Her eyes greeted the larger golden boomerang – the nearly twenty-two-pound, C-shaped, lustrous, gold nugget. *Wow! God only knows how much this is worth.*

“What a nugget! So, this is what was buried in Dale Smite’s back yard?”

“This and a slightly smaller one were buried behind that metal shed in soft sand.”

“How deep?”

“About two-and-a-half feet.”

“Let me guess – you melted the smaller one down into coins, like the ones you sent me.”

“You got it. Eighty-eight two-ounce coins and eighty-seven one-ounce, cube-shaped ingots.”

“Have you been able to sell any of it?”

“Yes, and with no problems.”

“Nice. Very nice, David. And, exactly how much does this gold nugget weigh?” *‘Exactly’ again. She likes to get the correct numbers for her reports.*

“Twenty-one pounds, nine ounces. Melted down into coins and ingots, one could probably get half of a million dollars out

of it. However, if it were sold as is – intact – it could fetch up to eight-hundred-thousand dollars. This is because gold nuggets earn a premium over the current ounce price. For this nugget, it would easily be forty percent higher than the ounce rate; most likely fifty percent higher, or even more. It's one of the largest nuggets found in North Carolina – the largest found in almost one hundred ninety years. I really don't want to melt it down, but selling it intact will be tricky."

"Yeah, and don't forget the taxman. He's going to chop off a big slice." *She caught the tax issue just like Chantelle. Very sharp. Very keen.*

"Great point, Cindy."

"It's too expensive and too attention-grabbing to safely sell on ebay." *Just like Chantelle. Uncanny.*

"You're right. And, it's way too expensive for local jewelers and those 'we buy gold' outfits."

"Hey, I think I've solved your gold-to-cash dilemma."

"The floor is yours, Ms. Santos." *Literally.*

"Break it into about two dozen pieces – nothing over a pound – and slowly sell the nuggets one by one on ebay. Only accept paypal or a cashier's check." Cindy was looking at gold nuggets for sale on ebay on her smartphone.

"I think you have solved the problem. That's an excellent idea, Cindy."

"It looks like most of them are way under a pound. In fact, most of these gold nuggets on here are just one to three ounces. Thus, you better break it into over a hundred nuggets. You'll have a nice steady income stream. You won't be able to blow it all on a motor yacht."

"Motor yacht? What makes you think that I would blow it all on a motor yacht?"

"Oh, I just threw that out there as a frivolous, just-came-into-money male purchase. You could substitute Ferrari."

"No, it won't be a fancy boat or a high-end sports car, nor even a big house. In fact, there won't be any big purchase. None. Period."

"That's smart, David. I've already done a story on a Wilmington-area family that won the North Carolina Lottery. They had over a million dollars after taxes. Twenty-two months later they were filing for divorce and bankruptcy. I believe it was in that order."

"Were you always this smart ... and sexy?" David asked as he ran his right hand up her right thigh. She didn't stop him. Cindy felt a tingle go up her spine and the heat rising in her tunnel of love.

They were soon back on the bed for round two. She rode him fast and hard. As David looked into Cindy's brown eyes, he knew that he was falling in love again. *I could live with this woman. / I want him ... to stay with me ... forever.*

Cindy hoped that he wouldn't bust his load before the deepest wave of pleasure moved through her body and radiated through her brain. Mr. Scrapalski held out just long enough. Baseball in July.

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After a two-hour, post-coital nap of interwoven dreams with overlapping themes, they awoke and kissed softly.

"David, I've got something very serious to tell you."

"What is it, my sexy Pinay?" [a Philippine woman] *Pinay? He must have done some research on my ethnicity. That or he's already had a Filipina girlfriend somewhere in his past. I hope that he didn't screw some disease-infested pok-pok [Filipino slang for a prostitute] in Newport News.*

"I think I'm already ad-dick-ted to you." *Too funny.*

David just chuckled and smiled at her. "Well, your puki [vagina in Filipino] makes me go kooky." *So silly.*

She grinned. "Do you want to go to dinner early, before it gets crowded?" Cindy asked while bending over to put on her beige panties. *God almighty, she's got a killer snatch. I don't think*

I'd ever get tired of that. Am I getting aroused again? Down, rover, down. Take a break. Enough already.

"Sure. I'm hungry."

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They arrived on foot at Engorged on The Walk at 6:06 PM. The restaurant only had four occupied tables; there were plenty of places to sit. The dinner rush hadn't started yet. The mid-30-ish, white waitress led them to a table with a view.

"You know, Cindy, your condo has a better view than these waterfront restaurants."

"I know." She paused for a second as she thought her remark sounded too boastful. "I mean, I ate at all of these river-view restaurants and bars before buying my condo. When I walked into that condo for the first time and looked out the window, I knew this was the one for me. We Filipinas like seeing water. We are a nation of over seven thousand islands."

"Well, it's a definite score. Premium digs." *Digs?*

"Thanks, again, David."

"What is this place known for?"

"Falling in love." Cindy gave him a dreamy, puppy-love-esque smile, then looked at the drink menu with her serious reporter's countenance.

"I've heard that the martinis are always good here." *I sure hope he doesn't think I'm some kind of river-bar-hopping alcoholic.*

"How about a pair of the mango-flavored ones?"

"Sounds like a winner, hard dog." *What did she just call me? Shades of Chantelle.*

They sipped their mango martinis and Cindy continued with the playful banter. She was feeling great. She knew that David was already smitten by her charms. It looked like he had a barrel capacitor strapped to his upper right thigh.

The waiter came back for their food orders. They decided to split a large lobster dish. The food was so good that their conversation ceased for ten minutes. When the engorging was complete, Cindy wiped her lips with the white cloth napkin and smiled at David.

"That tasted great," Cindy proclaimed. "And, not too much. I'm glad we decided to split that dish. I've got to watch the calories. I've got to maintain my weight. Being on TV, you get severely judged. Being overweight can even be a career killer. I've already seen it happen."

"I believe it," David said while holding the menu. "Hey, if you want another lobster dish to-go, it's no problem. You could put it in the fridge for tomorrow and the day after. I've got plenty

of cash on the hip.” *Gosh, I sound like a gangster. / I’m sure he does.*

“Why, I bet you do, golden boy.” *Just like Chantelle would say. Eerie. Just freaking eerie.*

“I can see the sun in your eyes.”

“Ah, that’s so romantic. Please don’t set me up for heartbreak, David.” *I can’t prevent that; only those lousy gods can ... and they probably won’t.*

“I wouldn’t do that to you. I promise.”

They paid up and left. They used the Riverwalk to get back to Cindy’s condo. They passed an assortment of tourists and locals on their way, some disembarking from boats at the docks. Some were even fishing. Cindy wondered if it was legal to do so.

Cindy loved how the day had gone, and when she felt David gently grab her hand, it’s was pure paradise. *He loves me. I can tell. He’s a decent guy, worth his weight in gold.*

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They were back in Cindy’s condo at 8:22 PM. It was another dazzling sunset. Plenty of reds in the sky this evening with streaks of orange rising from the horizon.

Cindy opened a bottle of Merlot and poured two glasses. David walked into the kitchen and lifted one to his mouth while admiring Cindy's sexy sampot. [rump in Filipino] *I know that he's checking out my ass. Men have no stealth when it comes to ogling women.*

"Excellent decision," David said while leering at her top. *Man, I want to feel those boobs in my meat hooks very soon.*

"You really like my breasts, don't you?" Cindy tried to act like she was annoyed, but actually enjoyed his eyes on her body too much to lodge a formal protest.

"I like the whole package." *Good answer.*

"Speaking of packages, have you checked to make sure that your gold is still under the sofa?"

David walked back into the living room and felt under the sofa. He didn't feel anything. He then got down on the carpet and looked underneath the sofa. It was gone. *Oh, no! Nooo! No fucking way!*

"Oh, my God, Cindy – it's gone!" David looked like he had seen the ghosts of Mark, Susan, Dale, and Chantelle.

"Relax! I put it in the safe when you were in the bathroom taking a pee. Gotcha!" *She certainly did.*

"Touché!" David remarked with a big smile.

Cindy was laughing once again, but now it was a little more exaggerated. The alcohol had reached her brain, and saturation was occurring. She was one giddy kitty.

Cindy got the gold fillet out of her bedroom closet safe. They both ran their hands over the golden boomerang as they kissed and stripped each other's clothes off. They fondled and caressed each other while looking at the gold nugget on the carpet. She squeezed David's sausage as he fondled her breasts. It was Eros d' Aurum (Golden eroticism).

After twenty-two minutes of missionary-style coitus, Cindy was out like an over-sexed lamb. David carried her into the bedroom and tucked her under the covers. For some reason, David wasn't drowsy at all; to the contrary, he was wide awake.

He flipped on Cindy's wide, flat-screen TV and started to channel-surf. He stopped at ESPN to get the baseball score on the crawl at the bottom of the screen. *Damn, Cindy's Giants are beating my Pirates 2-0, but it's only in the fifth inning. Plenty of time to erase a two-run deficit.*

He looked out the main river-view window. It was dark now. Car lights twinkled over the Memorial Bridge. *She's really got some place here. I'd love to sell my house in Raleigh and move in with her. I could get a lab-tech job down here. Even if it paid ten or twenty percent less, it wouldn't matter – we wouldn't have a mortgage or any car payments.* David was lost in his future fantasy.

He gazed at Cindy, who was sleeping so peacefully on her soft bed. *Need to stay on her sleep schedule. If I stay up all night, I'll feel like crap when Cindy wakes up. Always seem to have bad headaches when I have less than six hours of sleep, especially after drinking wine. It will be a crappy morning, and an agonizing drive back to Raleigh. Hey, I've still got some sleeping pills in my glove compartment! Yeah, that's it.*

Sure enough, he had one SleepPhast pill left. He gulped it down and chased it with the last glass of Cindy's Merlot. *Ah, this should knock me out real soon.*

He flipped through the TV channels. In the lower-right corner of The Weather Channel, it said that it was 9:39 PM. There would be a 50% chance of rain tomorrow and a high of 96. *Whew, it's like a sauna down here in the summer, but the other three seasons are nice. Winter is mild. I could live in this condo with Cindy in a heartbeat. I could pay her a hundred thousand dollars, so she doesn't think that I'm just some gold-laden freeloader.*

David then flipped back to ESPN to get an update on the Giants-Pirates game. The score ticker at the bottom of the screen stated that the game was now SF 2 PIT 2. *Ah, yes, we've already tied it up! C'mon Bucs!*

At 10:10 he thought that he heard a noise out in the interior, common-to-all-residents corridor. He opened the door. He didn't see anything but a row of closed doors on both sides. *Maybe I'm just hearing things. Or, maybe I just don't yet know how this building creaks at night. All old buildings groan,*

especially ones built on sandy soil, like this one. Yeah, it was probably just a settling moan.

After he resolved the noise issue to his satisfaction, he had another unnerving thought: lost keys. *Don't tell me I've lost my keys! No! No freaking way!*

David exited the condo, leaving the door unlocked. He walked out to his car and looked at the ignition, the seats, under the seats, and even in the glove compartment. No sign of any keys. He then looked in his right hand. There they were. *I am going nuts!*

The SleepPhast-alcohol interaction was intensifying. He was becoming more delusional. He soon thought that Cindy had left her car keys at the restaurant, even though some swiftly fading part of his mind – that rapidly shrinking part known as reason – remembered that they walked there.

His inane thought avalanche advanced. *I'll do her a big favor and retrieve her car keys like a good boyfriend should. The restaurant may not be open until eleven tomorrow morning. She may need to drive to the TV station in the morning. I guess I could drive her, but there may be stuff in her car that she needs for work tomorrow.* (Cindy had already told David that she had tomorrow off, and that she never drank alcohol on work nights, as she never wanted to be hung-over on camera; however, this data was inaccessible in his current state of mind.)

A delusional David began walking around in the parking lot, crawling through a latticework of thoughts. *It's much better to get those keys right now. After a shift change at the restaurant, the keys may get misplaced, or mysteriously disappear. Yeah, I really need to get her car keys now. I'll just leave her a note. But, how will I get back into the condo once the door locks? I need to borrow her condo keys for twenty minutes while she sleeps. She won't need them. I'll be right back. It'll be ok. She'll thank me later for doing this.*

He walked back up to her condo, entered, and tiptoed into her bedroom. Cindy was in deep-sleep mode. He saw her purple purse on the dresser. *Gosh, I hate going through her purse, but she'll understand.*

He found her large, silver ring of keys, and then re-zipped her purse shut. Cindy didn't even stir. David looked at her, smiled, and quietly closed the door to just a crack.

On the dark-stained, mahogany-red dinner table, David composed a short note on a white sheet of paper; it read:

Cindy, I went to the restaurant to retrieve your car keys. I took your condo keys so that I could lock and unlock the front door. I should be back by 11:00 PM at the latest.
Love U, David

David drew a heart-shaped face at the bottom of the note. It looked like something that a ten-year-old might add to a Valentine's Day card.

He then laid the pen down, turned the TV and lights off, and made a quiet exit.

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Cindy awoke at 1:11 AM and was a little surprised that David wasn't beside her. She got up and walked into the living room. It was almost completely dark, save for street light coming in between the blinds. A slow drizzle was softly pelting the river.

"David? David, are you here?" No reply. All she heard was the refrigerator's compressor kick on. *Where is he? Why did he leave?*

She started turning on some lights, eventually getting to the dining area. Then she saw David's note on the table. "Oh, my God!"

Cindy immediately went to her bedroom and got her purse. She looked all through it. *Gosh, he really did take my keys. Why did he think my car keys were missing? We never even used my car. My car keys are on the ring of keys that he took! They're very obvious. Is he mental? What was he thinking? Did he just want to drive my car? But, why? He has his car here. This is crazy!*

She put on some jeans and a white top and went down to check on her car. *Thank God, my car is still here – and all locked up. But, his car is gone. This is so weird. Very strange. Where is he right now? Where did he go?*

Cindy went back inside and called him. No answer; it went to voicemail. She left a voice message:

“David, please call me. I hope you’re ok. I’m not mad, just please call me when you get this message. Thanks, dear.”

She then texted him essentially the same message. She kept staring at her smartphone. No call or text reply was coming in. Nothing. Silence. *What should I do? Should I call the police? Is all of this just an elaborate ruse to give him some cover while he goes and fucks some other woman down here? He’s got enough cash on him for a high-end escort. No, he would never take my keys for something like that. I can tell that something’s seriously wrong with him – something’s not right with his head. I can feel it; his mind is off. Does he have very-early-onset Alzheimer’s? Or, maybe he’s unconscious somewhere. Oh, dear ...*

She made a cup of coffee, thinking that she was going to need to be up for a while. Her head slightly ached from the martini and the wine. She threw down a couple of aspirin and wondered if the gold nugget was still in her condo. *Did he take his gold nugget with him?*

She walked back into the living room. She didn’t see it on the carpet or on any piece of furniture. Cindy kneeled down and

looked under the sofa. *There it is. This is even stranger now. What in the world is going on?*

Cindy got her laptop going on the dining table. She went to the Channel 8 website. Her heart and lungs nearly shut down when she saw the newest story in the Breaking Local News section that read:

Motorist drowns when his car goes off the Riverwalk into the Cape Fear River. A man lost control of his car while going down Ann Street around 10:45 PM tonight in downtown Wilmington. He was later pronounced dead at the scene after rescue divers removed him from the sedan. Witnesses say that the driver was a white male. However, the driver's identity has not yet been released.

The news article's accompanying photo was a partially submerged, white, 2011 Ford Focus attached to a red tow truck's winch cable. *That's David's car! He's dead!*

Out of breath from sobbing, she glanced out the window. A lone cyclist in an orange outfit rounded the corner. They made eye contact for a fleeting second. Then her cell phone started ringing.





About the Author

Mike Bozart was born in Newport News, Virginia on a steamy afternoon in July of 1964. After graduating with an Earth Science degree from UNC-Charlotte in 1986, he started doing safety-oriented technical writing.

Former residences in North Carolina include Raleigh, Greensboro, Wilmington, Carolina Beach, High Peak (Etowah) and Asheville. Charlotte is his current residence. He has also lived in downtown San Francisco (early 1990s).

Mike has written numerous, compact, surreal *Secteur de Tryke*-branded poem-stories, and 133 (as of 7/19/18) meta-real 'pshort pstories' under the Psecret Psociety heading.

Gold, a summer story was rough-drafted between May 23 and July 11, 2013.

The author is remarried (Sharon) with a son (Kirk).

GOLD, the short story



by Mike Bozart | July 2011

"It was just another trip to the beach until ..." [rev. April 2016]

Note: This 3K-word short story preceded the 81K-word *Gold, a summer story* by approximately two years. Some of the characters, settings, and plot in this quick-read were used in the e-novel.

It all started with a weekend trip to Carolina Beach. Record-breaking heat. A late July weekend. The sun was completely mad in a torrid rage.

Her soon-to-be-ex-husband, Mark, was, too. He trailed her. Susan never noticed the small sedan he rented. However, she almost lost him around Laurinburg, when she stopped for gas. Well, almost. While standing at the gas pump, he watched her as she wondered: *Why did I not fill up the tank in Charlotte?*

Two hours later, and she's finally there. Carolina Beach. Out of the car. Barefoot. But, the beach sand was oh-so-infernally hot. It almost blistered her soles. *This sand is as hot as lava!*

She settles her 30-something, tanned, Native American body on a yellow-and-green beach towel in front of the Marriott. Almost immediately, bugs. An array of flying insects. Mosquitoes. Sand fleas. Horseflies. All biting. Then a gnat alights in her left eye. Totally miserable. *Why did I pick such a hot-ass, insect-infested weekend to come down here?*

Susan goes back to her hotel room. Sweaty. She takes a shower. A cold shower. *Ah, this feels much better. Screw that nasty beach. Scummer [sic] sucks. Why couldn't it be October? I wonder where Mark is. Oh, who the hell cares!*

Mark waited under the bed. (He had slyly slipped into her room when the cleaning lady went into the bathroom.)

After eleven refreshing minutes, Susan exits the shower wrapped in a white bath towel. She sits down on the bed and begins brushing her raven hair. While looking in the mirror above the dresser, she sees Mark's left shoe sticking out from

under the bed and almost screams. (Mark does not know that she has noticed him.)

She recomposes herself and gets dressed. And then she runs. Outside. Then down the steps. *How the hell did he get in my room? That tricky bastard! That was way too close!*

She makes it safely to the hotel office and reports the intruder/estranged husband. The desk clerk calls the police. A CBPD (Carolina Beach Police Department) officer arrives three minutes later.

The CBPD cop searches her room. Twice. However, her newly estranged hubby is nowhere to be found. *Where the fuck did Mark go?* (He actually jumped off the 3rd-floor balcony onto the sand and quickly hobbled to his car, only suffering a sprained ankle.)

Mark, the brown-haired, thirty-two-year-old Caucasian ex-husband-to-be, drives to a small motel on Canal Drive. He parks the car around back and checks in. Once situated in the two-star room, he begins to drink liquor. Vodka on the rocks. At seven o'clock, it's Xanax for dessert. And a half-hour later, he swallows some hydrocodone pills. He starts feeling crazy at eight. Insane thoughts abound in his cranium. *I'm going to find out what she's doing down here, one way or another. Oh, yes; I'm going to win this time, sweetheart. When should I call my lovergirl? Later tonight.*

The fiery furnace called the sun finally sets. Mark gets in his car and decides that this is the night. Faster and faster. His rage causes him to depress the accelerator pedal to the floorboard. <Crash!>

Back at the Marriott. "I'm glad that we have some time to be together." They, an older Asian American couple, were both saying this. Him and her. Alternately. In the hotel room next to Susan's as the gloaming glommed onto the piney horizon.

The older Asian American couple, Ben and Bao, heard the afternoon door slam. However, they decided not to get involved, thinking it wasn't their business.

After the police cleared her room, Susan finally fell asleep at 7:07 PM. She was frazzled, but even more exhausted. Then a knock on her door at 8:08 PM. She hesitated to get up, but finally did. *Who is it now?*

She walked to the door and looked through the peephole. She saw a cheerful older Asian American couple in exotic (to her) garb. She opened the door.

They said hello to each other. Susan noticed that Bao had a handbag just like hers. *That's mine! How did she get it? What a day!*

"I come to return your handbag, miss," Bao said. "I saw it sitting in the parking lot." *What?!*

Susan accepted it. "Thank you so much."

"Are you alright?" Ben asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. I just need to rest. It's been a long day."

"Ok, goodnight," they said in near-unison.

She closed and double-locked the door. Susan even pushed the recliner against it. She suddenly remembered that it was

their 9th anniversary. *Please God, don't let Mark come back here. Police, please find and arrest him.*

She went into the bathroom. She could hear a conversation in the room behind hers via the HVAC ductwork. Susan put her left ear next to the vent. *Am I really hearing this?*

"Jesus H. Christ, Jane, I just wanted a quiet, relaxing weekend at the beach. Is that too much to ask at my ripe old age?"

"You forgot the Viagra, didn't you? What fun we will have now. Not!" *He'd forget his dumb head if not for his neck.*

"I'm sorry. Damn, I hate this memory loss. But, I can't help it."

"Ah, maybe I can get your old pecker hard. C'mon, get over here, big boy."

"Who are you on that bed?"

[some female laughter]

"It's me, Charlie – your goddam wife for the last 48 years! Now, get over here and fuck me like a man."

"You won't let go of that pouting mood just yet; now will you, Jane?"

As entertaining as their conversation was, Susan decided to stop eavesdropping. She lay back down on the bed, listening to some Fleetwood Mac on the nightstand radio. She drifted into a twilight sleep and began hearing little audio tidbits in her quasi-dream.

They are uneasy. | Like that lady next door. | What kind of mischief is she involved in? | He tells her not to worry about it. | Ah, the police will sort it out. | They always do. | Let's enjoy us! | The need was great. | It had been a stressful three years. | The foreclosure. | The bankruptcy. | The lawyers. | The creeps. | That evil moon. | That eternally restless sea. | Madness nonstop. | An easy life is now gone.

Then a knock on her door again. She looked at the LED alarm clock on the nightstand. It was 10:09 PM.

Susan struggled to get out of bed. She slowly moseyed over to the door. But, before she could look through the peephole, she heard a deep male voice: "Carolina Beach Police. Anyone in there?"

"Yes, one second, officer."

She unlocked and opened the door. "What is it officer? Did you catch him?"

"We need to have a word with you, if you don't mind, ma'am," the burly, middle-age, white cop said. "Just a few questions down at the station." *Oh, my God! Why?*

"Oh my, what was happened, officer?"

"We'll discuss it at the station, ma'am." *Huh?*

She followed the officer to the CBPD station, just three minutes away. Once there, she took a seat in the tiny interrogation room.

“What is this about?” Susan asked. “How long will I have to be here?” *What a totally screwed-up vacation this has been. All thanks to my adorable a-hole husband.*

“We’ll start in just a moment, miss,” the rookie white officer said as he chomped down on a caramel. “It should only take ten minutes, tops.”

Susan spied what he was eating. “Ah, caramels. C’mon, pass that bag over here, officer. Make this a little more bearable for me.”

A shift of scene. The Carolina Beach McDonald’s the next morning. Tourists had already saturated the place by 8:30.

Down from Michigan, four Caucasian college lads tried to undo their hangovers with strong coffee.

“There are too many loud kids in here,” one of them (Rick) declared.

The screams of finally-at-the-beach kids and cash register tills slamming shut cacophonically intermingled.

“I agree, Rick. Too much noise and commotion. Guys, let’s get out of here. It’s making my hangover much worse.”

One of the hungover foursome picks up a local newspaper and reads the headline to the other three: “Man drowns after car goes off bridge.”

“That’s why the right lane was closed, man!”

“I wonder what led up to that, Ed.”

“Who knows?”

The gang of four departs. Soon they are at the Marriott. They check in. In short order they are poolside. One of them sees a note in the sand and retrieves it.

“What is it, Rick?”

“It’s just a fortune from a cookie, Ed.” *A fortune from a cookie?*

“Well, what does it say?”

“It says, ‘Summer lust is a bust’ ... he-he ... Can you believe that?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, want to throw some football on the beach?”

“Dude, the beach is way too crowded now.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

It is now mid-day by the outdoor hotel pool. The most studious Michigander continued to read the newspaper article. He wondered: *Why did he jump off the bridge? No, he didn’t jump; he was in his car. Oh, it was a vehicular accident. He went off the bridge in his car. But, how? Why? There were no vehicles on the bridge at that time, it says.*

Then all four semi-discuss it, while checking out the bikini-clad girls by the surf.

“Which ones do you think are single?”

“Cool off, Rick.”

“Do you think she is, Matt?”

A 20-something Asian lady walks past the four with a parasol.

“That girl ... you think she’s Vietnamese?”

“No, I think she’s Korean.”

A 7th wave washes over a six-year-old’s sand castle. He begins to cry. His mom consoles him.

“Looks like there ... is becoming here,” Ed announces.

The 20-something Asian lady, Saatchi, turns around and walks up to them. She calmly asks, “Did any of you know him?”

“Know whom?” Rick asks.

“Ok, have a nice day, guys,” Saatchi says and walks away.

The four lads were completely dumbfounded.

“Do you know her, Rick?” Ed asked.

“No, not yet.” He chuckles to himself.

“You aint hitting that, dude. Only in your dreams.”

“Did you ever see her before, Ed?”

“No. Never.”

“That strange music. Where is it coming from?”

The four dudes look around, not sure of the sound source.

Backtracking the story again. Saatchi was at that McDonalds's, too, earlier in the morning. In fact, unobserved, right behind the four college lads. She overheard them talking about her new boyfriend. *How could he do it? I bet he was trying to get with Susan, yet again? That weasel dick!*

Saatchi's mind was a million missiles a minute. And they were all striking. Exploding. A neural battlefield. *What in the hell happened? My idiot loverboy is now dead. He went off the Snow's Cut Bridge. But, why?! He never even called me.*

Saatchi took a deep breath as she started to walk back to her car. She was going to the police. She couldn't suppress the urge to know more. *Was he still screwing her?*

Saatchi's mind got caught in a vicious loop. And then in leaning columns. Nothing was stacking satisfactorily. She could see his eyes. *How many times did he lie? What was his facial expression when he was fucking her? Well, he's dead now. I should just let it go. I was always going to be the hidden, tucked-away, secret mistress anyway. He was never going to divorce Susan. I know it.*

Suddenly, a tap on her shoulder just before she reached her car. She turned around. It was one of the four collegiate crew: a shirtless Rick.

"Miss, I think you dropped this," Rick said as he handed her his 'business' card.

"Well, that's some technique, young man."

"My first attempt. Well, what do you think, ma'am?"

"Maybe if the times were different, Rick." *What?*

"Every day is different."

"Is that what they are saying these days on campus?"

"No, just me."

"Listen, you seem like a sweet guy. Maybe I'll give you a call when my life settles down."

"Ok, but what's your name?"

"Saatchi."

Rick watched her get in a red Porsche and drive away. *Man, I'd love to have some Cialis-enhanced sex with her.*

Back to the CBPD interrogation room. Routine questions from the sergeant. Susan would answer truthfully.

"Did you see Mark after he broke into your hotel room?"

"No, I never saw any part of his body after seeing his shoe protruding from under my hotel bed."

"Were you two still together?"

"Yes, we still lived in the same house in Charlotte."

"Was Mark addicted to drugs or alcohol?"

"No, not to my knowledge. He did smoke a little weed, though."

"Was anyone out to get him for any reason?"

"No, not that I was aware of."

Then the shocker: "Did you know that your husband died in a car accident tonight?"

"No way! Oh, no!" *Holy cow! How? What a cursed vacation.*

The grim reality set in as Susan drove off the CBPD lot. *Where should I go now? Mark is dead. He's really dead. Well, I won't see him under my bed again. I grew to hate him, but I didn't want him to die. Why did he drive off that bridge? None of his tires were blown out. The steering linkages were fine. So strange. And just like Mark.*

And everything kept moving along. A long, gritty, sea-salter [sic] of a day followed. Susan felt the grime on her neck as she walked along the beach beneath an indifferent rising sun. It had been a night of broken, torturous sleep.

Susan then headed back to the hotel and ate a light continental breakfast. She was ready to head back to Charlotte, get Mark buried, and start over.

When Mark's car crashed and flew off the Snow's Cut Bridge, it nearly hit Ned's fishing boat, 55 feet below, just missing it by 20 feet to the aft. A thunderous splash was followed by a four-foot-high wake. It nearly capsized his skiff.

The car windows were down. The Honda sank before anyone could get near it. Mark was unconscious. Ned saw his lifeless face go underwater. He made the 911 call.

A pair of emergency-rescue divers extricated Mark's body from the sunken car. Then they placed a buoy where the car sank. It had become too dark to continue operations.

The next day Mark's car was floated to the surface and placed on a barge. Two weeks later it was in a junkyard off US 421. It sat there, untouched, for a month.

Then one late August day, a guy named David, who needed a 2009 Honda Accord trunk walked in. He popped the trunk open to be greeted by 24 gold bars scattered about the interior. He looked around. *Am I on camera?*

David stared at the golden fortune and wondered: *How can I get this gold out of here without being detected? Obviously, no one knows what is in this trunk. Must act fast. Must be smart.* He quietly shut the trunk.

At the junkyard shack-office, he told the older man, Sam, that he would like to buy the totaled Honda for \$2,500. He hoped that Sam would agree to his price, but was ready to go higher.

Sam, a white-haired, Caucasian, 60-ish, one ear-missing junkyard owner, looked at him for a few seconds. He maintained his nonchalant expression as he studied David, a 28-year-old Amerasian techie from the Triangle area.

"You need the whole car, mate?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, it will be worth it to me for the parts over the next 10 years," David said with minimal enthusiasm. "I drive these Hondas until they die." *Hope that sounded convincing.*

"Ok, deal," the oblivious owner replied.

David paid with a credit card for it to be brought to his home, 135 miles away. Sam then had his lone employee, Jed, put it on a flatbed-style wrecker. None of the junkyarders [sic] knew what was in the trunk, not even the guard dog.

Over the next few weeks, David melted the gold down and had it recast into little ingots. No control numbers were on it now. He could slowly start to sell it, which he did.

David found a jeweler in Wilmington that didn't ask too many questions, and gave him \$1,000/ounce. He sold this jeweler one five-pound bar every Saturday morning. And like clockwork, he left each Saturday at 9:30 AM with a check for \$80,000.

This lucrative routine went on for months. Then one Saturday morning in late November, David noticed police cars parked in front of the jewelry store. *Oh, crap!*

He never went back. He couldn't risk it. And, the jeweler never called him.

Three Saturdays later on a gray mid-December afternoon, curiosity got the best of him. He called the jewelry store at 3:33 PM. No answer. All he got was a generic outgoing message. *Is he in jail?*

He hung up the phone. Fearing that the police now had his cell phone number, David packed up the remaining gold bars and headed for Fort Fisher. His mind was loud. *I'll bury the gold just before sunrise. If the heat comes down on me, I won't have any gold in my possession or on the premises. Whatever you do, David, don't fuck up this once-in-a-lifetime fortune!*

At 4:44 AM, he threw the last shovel load of sand over his golden stash. He even transplanted some sea oats over the burial spot. *Ah, perfecto! No one will ever find it. It looks untouched, and the gold bars are too deep for any metal detector to locate.*

David drove off on the high-tide-softening sand. He would just lie low for a while. He had plenty of loot on hand.

Ah, but he never saw Saatchi smiling behind that tall sand dune.

Scenes:

